

Draco Malfoy, the Amazing Bouncing... Rat?

Chapter One

Coffee and Polyjuice Potion

The worst day of Draco Malfoy's life started, as the majority of days do, by his waking up. A sleeping Crabbe and Goyle were doing their usual vigorous impressions of the Hogwarts express, and Draco woke at six with a vague idea that he had been trapped in a landmine.

Once he got tangled up in his sheets and fell off the bed, he realised this was probably not the case.

He used to wake up like this a lot in first year, he reflected. Lucky he had grown so there wasn't such a long way to fall...

Of course, lucky he had grown in any case, since the love life of a four foot tall sixth year would be a sad, lonely and pretty much one-on-one affair.

Mind you, if he could have been a bit shorter it would have helped with Quidditch. The best Quidditch players were small, it was just like those people who rode horses in the Muggle world... Jackies, or wait, no, wasn't that a president's wife?

Whatever a president was.

Draco reviewed the thoughts he had just had and realised he was in dire need of caffeine. Preferably injected straight into the vein.

I'm a *Malfoy*, he thought. A creature of the *night*. This early in the morning is just not on.

Right, all this calls for is a little bit of will power.

Up!

All right, maybe that was a tad optimistic.

Along, then.

Draco crawled manfully across to where he had dropped his clothes the night before. Once he was dressed in some haphazard fashion, he scrambled to his feet and staggered out of the door.

He felt, and probably looked, a lot like a vampire risen from the grave with a horrible thirst.

Coffee! I must have... coffee!

By the time he got to the Great Hall, he was sure he was cursed with an unholy hunger for all things caffeinated, which would be passed down to all his descendants.

It being a hideous time to be up, the Great Hall was almost empty.

Two Ravenclaws were kissing and studying together - typical Ravenclaw idea of romance - at their table.

"That shouldn't be allowed," Draco mused aloud. "They're going to ruin someone's appetite."

"Like the sight of you has ruined mine, Malfoy?"

Oh, perfect. A member of the Dream Team. How typical of the irony gods, and how typical of Hermione Granger to be up studying at six.

"Granger, all alone with a book? How terribly pathetic - and yet somehow unsurprising."

She shot him an Avada Kedavra look through her dark hair.

"Malfoy, where are Crabbe and Goyle? Doesn't the brain cell you share shut down if you're apart for too long?"

"Where are Potter and Weasley? Indulging in the love that dare not speak its name upstairs?"

She turned a page with unnecessary vehemence.

"Don't tell me *you* can quote Oscar Wilde. He was a Muggle."

"Sure?"

Draco smirked.

Granger sighed, and muttered. "Ferret."

"Mudblood," Draco returned, not to be outdone. But he was letting this idiot girl distract him from his sacred quest.

Coffee...

The Slytherin table was bare. Draco had no idea of how to get coffee. And Draco absolutely, positively had to have coffee.

Granger took a sip from a cup.

Draco only just stopped himself from going completely feral. He took several deep, calming breaths.

I will not torture the information out of her. I will not seize the cup and try to lick the bottom. I will retain some aspect of my dignity.

I want coffee I want coffee I want coffee!

"Oh, Granger?" he drawled in his most unconcerned tones. "How would one go about getting served at this damnable hour?"

Coffee, wailed his utterly spoiled inner child. Right now!

Granger was looking up at him with a slight frown. "In six years, you've never once gotten up early to study? How in the name of God did you get to be a prefect?"

Why are you wasting my time, woman? Give me coffee!

"I study like a normal person," Draco said between gritted teeth. "At *night*."

"Yes, I can see you're not exactly an early bird," she sniffed. "Are you aware that your robes are in a state and you haven't brushed your hair?"

"And yet it still looks better than yours...Look, Granger, I don't have time for this. I just want some coffee! All I want in the world is some coffee! If I had one wish, it would be for coffee!"

That wasn't dignified.

Granger was eyeing him as if he had gone insane. "Just ring the little bell on your table. A house elf will come and serve you. They're not supposed to be seen, but it's so early... Of course, it's appalling that-"

He held up a quelling hand.

"Please, Granger - I'm too tired... I think I might spew myself if I have to listen to you babbling..."

He strode over to the Slytherin table and rang the bell.

"It's not *spew*," Granger rambled on. "It's S.P.E.W... Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare!"

Draco sat down at his table and let his head thump forward onto the wood.

"Aren't you supposed to be the smart one?" he mumbled in understandably muffled tones. "Can't you see that that is a terrible name? What's wrong with H.E.L.P, House Elf Liberation Party, or something?"

Granger seemed startled for some reason, but just at that point Dobby, Draco's old house elf, appeared on the scene.

Draco was so relieved he could have kissed him. If not for the unbelievable gross factor involved, and the fact that Draco didn't really fly that side of the Quidditch pitch, and that lack of caffeine had robbed him of the ability to move.

In all fairness, Dobby looked delighted to see him too.

"Master Malfoy! Dobby is pleased to see you! Dobby has been hoping to see you for months!"

"Yes, well, Draco has been extremely busy," Draco said, not shifting his head from the table. "Draco promises to come and see you more often if Draco could just please, please have some coffee immediately. Draco has far too much blood in his caffeine system."

"Of course, of course..."

Dobby went bustling off. Draco felt a lovely sensation of relief sweep over him.

It was almost immediately dissipated by the eminently annoying voice of the Mudblood.

"How do *you* know Dobby?"

"Hello, he worked in my home for the first twelve years of my life," Draco muttered. "House elves practically bring up highborn wizarding children... not that you'd know that, Mudblood."

"I did actually. I've also read many 'pureblood' genealogies, and for 'highborn' you could just as easily read 'inbred.' Or 'evil ungrateful enslavers of elfkind.'"

"Granger, you can just take whatever book you're reading and-"

"Here's your coffee, Master Malfoy!"

Dobby came trotting in with a tray heaped with breakfast and, filling Draco's eyes like a mirage, a gleaming coffee pot...

He watched greedily as Dobby poured a cup...

"You look like a drug addict, Malfoy."

"And you look like a beaver, Granger."

Draco fell on the cup and drained it. Oh, coffee, my one true love! Coffee and coffee and coffee, sweet sweet coffee!

"Dobby remembered you like it black, sir."

Draco smiled. "Yeah, thanks. It's really good."

"Is Miss Hermione wanting anything more?"

"Just Malfoy's head on a plate, thanks," Granger murmured, not quite low enough.

"If you came here to study, Granger, then study and stop annoying me."

"Oh, you are so one to talk, Malfoy, but I think I'll take your advice. Arithmancy is so much more interesting than you."

Dobby was starting to look upset and bewildered.

"Particularly Summoning Sums," Granger added loftily.

"All right, now I *know* you're mental," Draco said. "Trigomancy is by far the most interesting part of the course."

He began to butter some toast, scowling over at the girl who had beaten him in the Arithmancy exam by five lousy points. To his somewhat overwhelming astonishment, she smiled brilliantly.

Her teeth really had become a whole lot smaller since first year.

"Oh, that's really fun as well!" she agreed enthusiastically. "Tell me, did you prefer using the Theoremagic or did you like the manual spellcasting? It takes longer but I think you get much more of a feel for the subject-"

"Are you mad? The only spell worth considering is the Calculatus spell-"

Draco was really starting to feel much better now he had coffee. And Arithmancy was one of his favourite subjects.

"I never really got that one," Granger confessed, as if she was telling him about her secret life as a Spellstripper.

Well, it wasn't as if this was in *public*...

"You'd have to be completely stupid not to get that one - oh, wait, there's the reason - Look, it's perfectly simple."

Dobby crept off. Draco spent the next hour conducting an across-tables shouting match with Granger about Arithmancy.

Eventually even the absorbed Ravenclaw couple noticed.

"Look," said the boy, "If you two want to talk, can't you just sit together?"

"Go sit on a Blast-Ended Skrewt," Draco suggested sweetly. "Theoremagic is wildly overrated, you bushy-haired imbecile."

They had been Accio!ing each others' napkin diagrams for some time when the door opened again.

"See here, Ferret boy, Pythagoras' Theoremagic Theorem is a classic," Granger was saying heatedly.

"You mean it's old and useless, Mudblood? Quite so."

"Malfoy! *Why* are you bothering Hermione?"

Oh, lovely. If it wasn't the Boy Who Lived To Be Self-Righteous, and his sidekick, Weasley the Freckled Wonder.

Granger looked around and beamed. "Harry, Ron! Nice of you to join us!"

"Us?" echoed the Weasel.

"Granger and the little voices in her head," Draco explained loftily. He finally remembered about his toast, which had gone stone cold. "And I'd be eating, but the sight of you is having such an effect on my upjerk reflex..."

"And the sight of you is having such an effect on my Really Wanting to Pound Your Pasty Face In reflex," growled Weasley.

"One, I wasn't *doing* anything, Weasel boy, and two, I'd like to see you try it, and three, what do you mean by pasty?"

Draco stood up, weighing the odds. He could take Weasley, Wizard Wannabe alone, and with Potter added... Hmm...

"Just leave it, Ron," Hermione said. "You don't need to waste time on narcissistic Slytherins..."

"Huh?"

"What about Malfoy's mother?"

Draco rolled his eyes and left. No wonder, with friends like that, that Granger was occasionally desperate for a bit of intelligent conversation.

He wandered back to the Slytherin rooms, wondering if Crabbe and Goyle would be up to the intellectual challenge of learning to breathe through their noses.

Draco had thought Potions would be relaxing after his somewhat odd breakfast.

Draco should have remembered the law of Murphy, greatest and most depressed Irish wizard of his time. (A teetotal Irishman is a dangerous thing. He may begin to think. Then he may take over the world.)

He was lounging in the back row, wondering what would be the most disgusting thing he could drop down Longbottom's robes and horribly torn between slugs and fresh Boomslang skin, when Snape strode in.

Draco liked Snape. He honestly did. The man was funny, he was a good teacher and he sided with Slytherins against the - oh, rest of the world. As far as Draco was concerned, he had only two faults.

There was the obvious lack of personal hygiene. And there was the apparent PMT.

It was hard to tell behind all the hair, but Draco would have laid a hundred Galleons that the man had a nasty glint in his eye.

He was, quite obviously, ready to kill. He was demented. He was a merciless man on a mission of death.

"I wish to support cooperation and harmony between the houses."

Draco blinked hard. Or not.

"So I've come to the conclusion that each person should work with a partner from the other house on their Polyjuice Potion."

Snape leaned back in his chair and listened to the buzz of shocked protest as if it was Mozart at his best.

Draco, who had remembered about Murphy by now and was employing his favourite world view of persistent pessimism, waited for more.

"Potter and Bulstrode."

Harry Potter looked vaguely panicked and over at Millicent. She licked her thick lips.

He began to look extremely panicked.

Draco couldn't help smiling. Millicent's mad secret crush on Potter had come out in fifth year and in Draco's opinion, it couldn't have happened to a nicer person... This pairing was too, too cruel.

Too, too perfect.

Giggles broke out across the classroom when Millicent fluttered her eyelashes. Potter looked like he wanted to hide.

Even Weasley and Granger were trying not to laugh.

Draco looked over at Granger, who was stuffing her robes in her mouth, and thought - I'll take her. She's the only Gryffindor with any brains, it will really hack her off which will be funny, and - anyway, we weren't quite done talking about Arithmancy...

"Crabbe and Longbottom."

"Sir, are you trying to pair off all the little secret crush cases?" Draco drawled.

Blaise Zabini fell off her seat laughing. Snape's eyes narrowed.

"I must be, Malfoy, because you and Weasley are together."

Ron Weasley went so pale all his freckles seemed to be fluorescently lit. Draco was disgusted, but... well, Weasley's horror was funny, and he supposed he'd asked for it a bit.

Not that he'd ever take this from any teacher but Snape.

"How did you ever guess our naughty little secret?" he inquired as Weasley appeared to suffer a massive coronary. "We thought we were so careful."

"Goyle and Granger."

"Alliteration," Draco said. "Sweet."

He shot Weasley, who was still paralysed with rage, a baleful look.

"I'm not coming to you, lovebunny."

"Just sit there and try not to think disastrous thoughts in the direction of my Potion," Draco ordered in the Malfoy tone which made slaves desperate to obey, enemies desperate to escape and girls... well, just desperate.

It seemed as if it made Weasley desperate to punch him.

"It's our Potion," he snapped.

"It's my perfect grade that takes a dive if you mess up - which seems to be your destiny in this great lottery of life," Draco sneered. "Sit down! If you think you can manage it."

"I will not!"

"The Weasleys, ladies and gentlemen. Fewer brain cells than Galleons - and that's saying something."

"Oh, yeah? Well, I've got something to say to *you*, Malfoy-"

"Ron, shut up!"

"Hey," Draco drawled in Granger's general direction. "That was my line."

She stood in front of them, on her way to fetch some ingredient. Her eyes were snapping.

"He's not worth it," she continued.

"Okay, that wasn't."

She leaned over the desk to touch Weasley's violently coloured hair, looking at him with fierce intentness and - somewhat to Draco's amazement - managing not to vomit.

"He's an utter idiot for treating you - for treating anyone - this way. We just have to assume that this is the way he was taught and he's too stupid or too basically nasty ever to question it. And so he's not worth any of your time or your anger."

"Hey, I'm right here, Mudblood!"

Granger's brown eyes did not even flicker in his direction.

"He's not even worth noticing."

"Pity you didn't work that out a few years ago," Draco called after her retreating back. "It would have saved me a very hard slap across the face."

Granger didn't turn around. Weasley sat back with a smug look on his face.

"Go ahead and mess up the Potion, Malfoy," he said.

"I happen to be good at Potions, Weasel. It's not like you ever made a Potion successfully - let alone this one."

The suddenly smug look on Weasley's face irritated Draco further. It was almost a relief when he started scowling as Draco set up the cauldron.

"Hey, Malfoy, I want to ask you a question."

"That no on the candlelit dinner is final, Weasley."

"I know it's genetically impossible, but could you try to be less of a prat? What the hell were you doing with Hermione this morning?"

"Making mad passionate love across a room. We Malfoys are a talented family."

Weasley's look of speechless fury was a rich reward for the disgusting concept Draco had just presented himself with.

"Talking about school, Wizard Wheezy."

The blank look on Weasley's face was reminiscent of Crabbe and Goyle.

"School?"

"Yes, school. It's this damn great building in which we are all taught, and some of us actually learn, magic? Come to think of it, buggered if we're not there now."

"You were talking to Hermione about school."

"Arithmancy. Remember, that subject you're not intelligent enough to take?"

"Well, you'd just better not do it again."

"What, Arithmancy? Listen, even if I dropped a subject, my grades would still be as far above yours as my family is above yours."

"You leave *Hermione* alone!" Weasley snarled. "Don't start bullying her."

"Awww, does Ronnie have a crush? Awww, isn't that just too precious for words? Say, Weasley, what do you get if you mate a weasel and a beaver?"

Weasley had gone bright red, which was an interesting contrast with his hideous hair. He also looked ready to kill.

"Remember, you each have to drink your partner's Polyjuice Potion at the end of class," Snape said.

Now Weasley looked ready to die of disgust.

"I'd rather kill myself!"

"Take me with you," Draco muttered. "But at least you've stopped blushing like a bashful schoolgirl. Oh no, wait, look - there it is again..."

"Sod *off*, Malfoy!"

Draco and Ron were too busy squabbling to notice anyone else slip by their table.

"Give me a piece of that revolting clown's wig you call hair, Weasley," Draco commanded. "I've already put my hair into your beaker."

"Wait, I've just decided I'd rather fail than become your pasty albino self..."

"Come on Weasley, you know you've always wanted to be rich, handsome and charming... and well, me..."

"You couldn't charm the warts off a skinned toad, Malfoy-"

Draco swung at Ron, and when Ron ducked he pulled out the hairs he wanted.

"Why, you!"

Draco stared at Ron's furious face, wondering whether the Weasley cretin would actually hit him, as he dropped the hairs.

Neither of them noticed that the hairs fell a little way from the beaker.

Neither of them noticed the figure brushing by their table, letting another kind of strand fall into Draco's beaker.

Neither of them noticed anything at all.

"I am extremely disappointed!" Snape shouted. "Although," he said, sneering at Longbottom, "in the cases of some, I am hardly surprised. I handed out clearly Photocharmed instructions on how to make these Potions, and not one of you has been able to manage it! So much for your cleverness, Miss Granger. As for you, Mr Malfoy - I can only suppose Mr Weasley distracted you from your task."

"That's right, sir," Draco agreed placidly. "With his unwanted attentions."

"Ten points from Gryffindor," Snape snapped.

Draco stretched and yawned lazily, feeling that lovely warm glow that comes from being a malicious bastard, and being so *good* at it.

He saw Granger and Weasley both shooting him Avada Kedavra glares, and he winked at them. Weasley looked apoplectic with anger and Granger looked at him with sheer contempt.

Potter still looked far too shaken by his little Brush with Bulstrode to pay any attention to the little cross-class duel going on.

The distinctly scarred-for-life look on Potter's scarred-for-life face distracted Draco from the fact he was feeling quite ill.

I think I'll take a trip to the little wizards' room before Care of Magical Creatures... ugh, being around Gryffindors for two lessons in a row, no wonder I feel queasy.

"You all right?" grunted Crabbe, as Snape told them all they were idiots, failures, squibs, disgraces to their kind and should become Filch's servants but at least should never, never darken the door of his dungeon again (in other words, wrapped up the class pretty much as usual).

Draco grimaced, that savage expression which had started the rumour Malfoys had vampire blood in them.

Which wasn't true.

Probably.

"All the better for you asking stupid questions, Crabbe," he snapped, shaking off his hamlike hand with an imperious air and striding away from him, shoving viciously past the Twee Trio on his way out.

"Dear, dear, is poor little Malfoy sick?" Weasley jeered. "Get Snape to tuck you up in bed."

"I'm not into that kind of thing, Weasley. Unlike you."

Draco stalked off, hearing Granger's voice behind him.

"Harry, what happened? You're looking a bit - fragile-"

Hopefully Millicent had pushed her luck with naughty touches, and Potter would end up gibbering at St Mungo's.

Draco tried not to double up, and dashed into the mens' room as fast as he could.

That *stupid* Weasley, how in God's name had he managed to screw up the Potion? Or could Granger somehow have poisoned his coffee? Oh, treacherously energising beverages!

He fell through the door and onto the floor.

The pain was, quite simply, blinding. It pulsed in silvery cold waves through his stomach, his cheek sticking to the tile with sweat, blood bursting from his lip as he bit it hard and winced, burrowing in on himself, trying to get smaller so he could fold the pain up into a knot and...

He really seemed to be getting smaller...

His clothes felt hot and too heavy, black robes scratching against his skin as he squeaked, his clothes felt...

Too big.

And wait. Squeaked?

Malfoys did not squeak.

Which was when his clothes swallowed him.

A mountain of black robe was swamping him, smothering him, and the itching was getting worse, like...

Like fur growing.

Again.

Draco remembered what having fur was like.

Not another incident like with damn Professor Moody two years ago, please, please no...

"No!" said Draco.

Except all he heard was a squeak.

He shot out from under his robes, desperate to flee, to get away before someone bounced him from floor to ceiling again, vowing revenge on whichever member of the Dream Team had thought this would be funny...

When a pair of feet came hurtling towards him.

You can't outrun a human, Draco. So be sneaky. So be a *Slytherin*.

Draco froze, as if in complete terror. Which was not all that hard an act to put on.

When the hand came down, he bit it so hard the blood spurted.

And then he ran, ran, ran, pausing to be thankful the door was open, scurrying into the suddenly-gigantic corridor, wondering what on earth he was supposed to do now...

When he bumped into another pair of feet, and was seized by another huge hand.

There was something about those feet, he thought. Even at this scale, surely they were oversized...

"Oh, look, guys! What a cute rat!"

Draco's first thought was, a cute *what*?

And his second was - oh no. Not Weasley.

He was a helpless rodent in the hands of the Gryffindors.

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## Chapter Two

### Fluffy the Magic Dra... Er, Rat

'Put me down this instant, Weasley, you utter utter prat,' Draco snapped. 'I am in terrible danger!'

Weasley's oversized and still-ugly face crumpled into an expression that... somehow reminded Draco of that savage Hagrid, the bastard who has misread the dictionary definition of 'set wild beasts upon' for 'teach.'

Oh no, he thought... that was how the madman looked at his precious Blast-Ended Skrewts.

'Isn't it adorable?' Weasley cooed.

'Weasley, let go of me right now, I have no time to deal with your apparent bestiality!'

He waved Draco in the air, making Draco feel distinctly seasick. Granger's curls and Potter's messy black hair wobbled alarmingly into vision.

'Put me down!' Draco howled. 'I don't want to play rat Quidditch. I will visit the dreaded Malfoy vengeance upon you, Weasley! Tremble in your miserable secondhand robes, because you are going doooo - oooh, I'm going to be sick...'

Weasley did not seem deterred by these dire threats.

Potter's tones made Draco feel even more like vomiting.

'It's a - nice rat, yeah, Ron, but I think it wants to get down. It's squirming. It could be wild.'

'It could be diseased,' added Granger.

'Same to you, Granger,' Draco snapped.

'No, it likes me,' Ron said defensively, hugging Draco to his chest. 'It hasn't tried to bite me.'

'You think I want to die of poisoning? Put me down, you delusional psycho!'

The three Gryffindors stood around, looking blissfully unaware of Draco's enraged howls.

'I think you should put it down before we go to Care of Magical Creatures,' Granger advised in her bossy tones.

'Anyway, remember what happened with your last rat,' Potter said in a lower voice.

Ron was still cradling Draco.

'Harry, don't be paranoid. It's just a little rat. It's not even quite full-grown. Did you ever see anything as cute and harmless in your life?'

'I'll get you for that, Weasley!' Draco shouted.

'So... what?' Harry asked. 'You're going to keep it?'

'I'll show it to Crookshanks first,' Ron said defensively.

'Is that your name for your fat mother, Weasley?'

Ron petted Draco, who began to seriously consider the biting option.

Granger was looking anxious.

'We're going to be late... Let's discuss this after class...'

And so Draco found himself tumbling around in that damned Weasley's hands as the Three Musketeers who had plagued his life for six years ran to that insane Hagrid's class.

Where there were mad animals.

Mad, ferocious animals.

Jaws able to crunch up a rat in one bite.

Damn you, Murphy!

\*

'I mus' say, it's a fine specimen o'a rat,' Hagrid boomed, holding Draco up to his horrid bushy face.

'I've had just about enough come-ons for today, you filthy half- giant,' sniffed Draco in his most Malfoy manner. 'Unhand me.'

'I'll jus' check if it's a boy 'r a girl,' Hagrid continued.

'Excuse me?! Excuse me, you will not! Oy! No! Stop that! Isn't it clear that I am all man? Hey, hey, those are very special places...'

'A lil boy,' Hagrid announced, handing him back to Weasley.

'What exactly do you mean by little?' Draco demanded, outraged.

'Thanks, Hagrid,' Weasley grinned.

'Thanks?! Oh, yes, insult, sexual abuse-'

'I want to keep him,' Weasley continued.

'Yeah? Yeah, well you and that oaf can keep your desires to yourself!'

'Don' see any problem wi' tha'. Looks quite healthy. An' clean.'

'I bathe a hell of a lot more than either of you!'

Weasley's face was glowing like his hair.

'He does, doesn't he? And I think he likes me. What do you think I should call him?'

'Well... come t'think of it... He does remind me of someone,' said Hagrid. 'Tha' lil face...'

'Draco,' Draco prayed. 'Draco Malfoy! Come on, your most stunning student! He reminds you of Malfoy!'

'Tha' sweet three-headed dog I used to have,' Hagrid concluded.

'YOU IMBECILE!'

'You genius, Hagrid!' Weasley looked at Draco with that unsettlingly boneheaded air again. 'You know, he does look like a Fluffy...'

'FLUFFY?!'

Oh, that just puts the tin lid on everything, that does.

'All ri', class!' Hagrid shouted. 'Now we're goin' to examine those cute Saber-Toothed Butterflies again - you know, the ones tha' grow four feet across...'

To a collective groan, Hagrid turned to Weasley.

'Mebbe ye should take your lil pet outside an' play wi' him. Don' wan' him gettin' eaten.'

'What exactly do you mean by 'play'? ' snapped Draco, who was really getting grouchy, as he was carried off.

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Weasley foiled every one of Draco's cunning plans to escape by the simple expedient of being six foot four with hands which were like walls for a rat.

Then he carried him back to Gryffindor tower. He had a free class and he seemed eager to show off his new pet.



Draco was becoming convinced he had died and gone to hell.

On the other hand, he was sure hell would be filled with more likable people than Gryffindors.

'He's the most adorable rat I've ever seen,' cooed Lavender Brown.

'I'm real sorry your Irish boyfriend doesn't satisfy you, Brown, but get your nasty Gryffindor hands off me this instant.'

'Look at him,' purred Parvati Patil. 'I bet he can understand every word we say, can't you, diddums?'

'The name is Malfoy!'

Weasley's face was bright with pride. He kept grabbing Draco back from the girls to give him an extra pat.

'He has such beautiful fur,' continued Lavender. 'So unusual - it's almost white blond.'

'Remind you of someone's hair?' shouted Draco. 'Idiots! Prats! Damned damned Gryffindors!'

'We've already started to bond,' Ron told them proudly.

'Bond! You kidnapped me!'

'What are you doing?' shrieked Lavender.

For a moment, Draco thought that somebody had heard him at last.

Then he realised that Potter and Granger had come into the room. Granger was carrying a cat.

If Draco's fur had not already been white, it would have become so.

Oh my God, Draco thought. I'm going to die.

But I'm too young and devastatingly attractive to die!

Weasley's grip on him grew tighter.

'Just to make sure, Ron,' said the Boy Who Fed Fellow Students to Felines.

And, with Draco squirming frantically all the time, Weasley held him up to Crookshanks' face.

'I'll kill you, Weasley!' Draco bellowed. 'I'll report you to the MSPCA! I'll tell my father! I'll bite you really, really hard, just you wait and see!'

It wasn't fair. He liked cats. He had even fed this one and patted it a few times. He wouldn't have done that if he'd known it was Granger's.

He wouldn't have done it if he'd known it was going to eat him!

The cat squinted at him.

'Are there no animals who are really animals in this place?' he asked.

Draco gasped. 'You know who I am?'

'Of course. You're that nice boy with the fish heads, Draco Malfoy, the one who annoys my mistress. You're a bit more rat-shaped than usual.'

'Can you help me?'

Oh, that's nice. A true touch of Malfoy dignity, begging household pets for help.

'How can I? I'm a cat. I'll do my best, as I did for Sirius, but if you don't mind - I was in the middle of romancing Mrs Norris. Now there's a foxy kitty-'

Crookshanks leaped out of Granger's arms and trotted away.

Sirius? Draco thought. Sirius Black? The criminal?

Of course! He turned me into a rat, and now he's come to kill Potter!

It's an ill wind...

'You see?' Weasley said triumphantly. 'He's just a sweet, innocent little rat.'

'Oh, please bugger off.'

Granger leaned forward and her hair almost smothered Draco.

'Watch it!'

It smelled quite nice... Shame her shampoo didn't straighten her hair as well.

'You're cutting off my air supply, imbecilic Mudblood.'

She smiled. She didn't have a bad smile.

'He is terribly cute,' she said.

'Oh no, not another one. Are none of you Gryffindors getting any - oh, wait. Stupid question.'

Granger began to stroke him.

'Madam, keep your hands to yourself. I must insist - hey! With the fur, not against it!'

Granger continued to stroke him. At least her hands were gentler than Lavender's.

She came and sat beside Weasley. Potter joined them, sitting on a chair nearby. Draco was extremely thankful that Potter made no attempt to touch him.

'Hey, can I hold Fluffy?' Granger requested.

Weasley beamed with pride. 'I knew you'd take to him. Of course, you take to anything that's cute, Hermione,' he teased.

'For the fifteen millionth time, I do not!' said Granger.

'For the fifteen millionth time,' said Weasley, and coughed out the name 'Lockhart!'

'Oh no, Granger,' said Draco. 'Not old Loveheart. Not you, too. I thought you were supposed to be intelligent!'

'I was twelve!' Granger said indignantly. 'I don't still just go for looks. Otherwise, wouldn't I be camped outside the Slytherin common room with a placard saying 'Draco Malfoy, I luuurve you'!'

She laughed casually. Both the Gryffindor boys had frozen in horror.

'What?' chorused Weasley, Potter and Draco in shocked unison.

Of course, nobody heard Draco.

Granger looked mildly amused.

'Oh come on, guys. I don't fancy the ferret, if that's what you're looking Confunded about.'

'Fancy...' Weasley seemed to be rendered speechless by sheer disgust.

'Weasley. It's not that outlandish a concept, and besides you have me on your lap.'

'Hermione, I think that gargling noise Ron is making means that you just indicated Malfoy could be considered in any way attractive.' Potter added hastily, 'I'm sure you didn't mean it.'

'I am in every way attractive!'

'Ron, Harry. His personality is more corrosive than Bubotuber pus. He's a nasty, prejudiced scumbag. I'd like to see him fry. But objectively, you have to admit he's attractive.'

'Damn straight! Oh, and hey about all that other stuff.'

Everyone was still utterly deaf to Draco.

'You can't be serious, Hermione,' Potter was saying weakly.

The gurgling that came from Ron sounded a little like 'foul, rat face.'

'Okay, that's - really pretty accurate,' Draco had to admit.

Granger sighed. 'Parvati! Lavendar!'

The two girls came over from the other side of the common room, and immediately began to fuss over Draco again.

'Draco Malfoy,' said Granger.

Lavendar pretended to swoon. 'Where?'

'Stop rumpling my ears, Weasley. This is getting interesting.'

'What do you think of him? In a physical sense.'

Lavender and Parvati clearly had not been thinking of any other sense.

'He's gorgeous,' Parvati sighed. 'I mean, ever since fifth year - not that he was bad before then, but once he grew up a little...'

'Got those muscles,' added Lavender. She shot Potter a look that suggested Finnigan had competition. 'All Seekers have that sexy lean-yet- muscled thing going on.'

Potter went red.

'Go back to me,' urged Draco.

Parvati clearly needed no encouragement.

'Those silvery, piercing grey eyes...'

'That preschool-blond hair...' Lavender chimed in.

'Those cheekbones,' said Parvati.

'That face,' added Lavender.

'That body.'

'I heard he had Veela blood in him.'

'I bet he does have Veela blood in him!'

'Careful, now. It's nice to know I have a fan club, but you are drooling an awful lot and I am a very little rat.'

'He got sixty-three singing Valentines last year. I hope he liked mine.'

'I keep watching when Quidditch matches are on,' Parvati grieved, 'but so far he's always been wearing trousers under his robes. So many from the wizarding families don't.'

'Everyone seems to these days,' Lavender said.

Potter went puce.

Draco swore to God that if he ever got out of here, he was giving everyone on his team an extremely urgent warning.

'I saw him without his shirt on once-' Parvati confided girlishly.

'WHAT?' yelled Draco and Weasley together in pain.

Granger looked horrified. 'Thank you, that's quite enough. No need to overshare...'

'But he's an evil Slytherin,' Parvati said hastily. 'Ugh, Slytherins.'

'Eeeew, Slytherins,' Lavender agreed quickly. 'Down with the Slytherins. Uh - on an unrelated topic, Parvati, could I see you over there for a minute?'

Lavender and Parvati sped off, giggling.

'Well, that was... interesting,' said Draco.

'Well, that was... disgusting,' said Potter.

'You see what I mean?' Granger asked. 'Though I wouldn't have put it like that. He's a horrible person, and no girl who respected herself would have anything to do with him. But the fact remains that he's much more handsome than is fair - and he knows it, too.'

'Listen, I have ready access to several mirrors. How could I miss it?'

Draco made a mental note to look into the Gryffindors. He had dated several Ravenclaws, but had kept well away from Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors on general principles. But if the girls were gagging for it...

Then he remembered he was a rat, and his only close personal relationship was likely to be with a cheese rind.

Oh, terrific.

Draco sidled out of Weasley's hands, trying not to attract attention, heading for the

inkpot and paper on the little table by their sofa.

Weasley seemed to be in shock and didn't notice.

Draco dipped one paw in the ink and began to write.

I AM

Weasley, not looking, dragged Draco back onto his lap.

'I don't care what you say,' he said. 'Malfoy is vile slime and looks it. Don't you agree, Fluffy, you adorable thing?'

'Go kiss a Flobberworm,' snapped Draco. 'Let go of me! I want to - whoa! What are you doing, Weasley? No touching of personal places!'

My life is destroyed, Draco thought. I'm a rat, the Gryffindors fancy me, there's no way out of this mess I can see and Ronald Weasley appears to be trying to tickle my stomach.

I have hit rock bottom.

Weasley told them all. 'I'm going upstairs to change into my Quidditch robes we are late for practice, we can change when we get there.'  
Come on, Fluffy.'

While you're getting changed?!

Now, Draco thought with deep bitterness, rock bottom has just hit me.  
There was absolutely no reason Draco could see for Weasley wanting to take his rat with him to Quidditch practise.

Unless, of course, the sadistic Gryffindor wished to scar him for life.

Draco, as the captain, got his own Slytherin changing room. And his own room. And a certain amount of privacy, and a blissful freedom from nasty, accidental looks at Crabbe and Goyle in their distinctly unwashed glory.

And now...

Gryffindors. Naked Gryffindors.

Not even the female kind.

Not that he would have looked if they were.

Much.

'Oh, honestly, Weasley! Little pink elephants?'

Draco turned around with dignity and then fell off his bench with... less dignity.

'Potter! Oh, good going! Now I'm blind! Blind and traumatised. Not even my father will be able to afford the therapy bills for this!'

Spin around.

Finnegan.

Thomas.

If Longbottom had been on the Quidditch team too, Draco would have committed suicide.

'In the name of God, you Gryffindors! **All** pink elephants?'

\*

'Could you take care of Fluffy while I'm practising?' inquired Weasley pitifully of Granger.

Draco was delighted to see Granger looking at the redhead as if he were half-witted.

'I wanted to take him up on the broom,' Weasley pouted, 'but Harry said he might fall off...'

'I'm touched by Potter's concern.'

'But I know he will miss his Daddy, won't you, Fluff?'

'You are losing your mind,' Draco informed him frigidly. 'And you are, most certainly, not my father. He's much wealthi - ugh - oh my god, Weasley, what are you doing?'

Weasley was looking at him in that disgusting besotted way again, and inching Draco up to his face.

'Wait. No. We can work this out some other way. I'll give you any amount of money you want. No. Stop. Help! Sexual abuse! Rape!'

Granger reached up and grabbed Draco.

'Ron, don't even think about giving your rat a goodbye kiss. It probably has fleas.'

'How dare you, you filthy plebeian! I wash every day! I am sparkling clean and kissable.'

Draco reconsidered what he had just said.

'He might give me fleas, though.'

Is this how my life is going to be? he thought. Even shorter than Potter, covered in fur, living in Gryffindor tower and fighting off Weasley's advances?

No, it was too horrible. It couldn't be.

In the grip of desperation, he trotted over to Granger's eternal schoolbag and the ink and parchment that lay beside her.

He tipped over the bottle - no time for neatness, this was life or death! - and dipped his paw into the ensuing flood. He began to write.

I AM D

'Ron!' said Granger. 'Ron, your rat's doing something weird!'

Oh no, here was Weasley back again like a bad penny - which was probably more than his family had in Gringott's.

A flash of diabolical red, and Weasley had Draco in his grip once more.

'Do you know what this means?' bellowed Weasley, in a state of high excitement. 'My rat's...'

'Draco Malfoy!' Draco shouted back. 'Malfoy! Malfoy! Malfoy!'

'\*Magic\*!' said Ronald, glowing. 'Isn't that cool?'

Draco wriggled away, and began to scribble frantically once more.

YOU REDHAired **SOD**, I AM

'Hey, everybody!' crowed Weasley. 'I have a magic rat!'

'There's a switch,' said Potter, who was leaning against Granger's seat looking at Draco with suspicion.

Draco felt comforted by this scrap of normality in a life gone mad.

The world may become flat and the seas may turn to blood, but Potter and I will always hate each other.

'Hey,' he snapped, 'at least **you're** not tiny and pathetic and forced to live in Gryffindor and covered in hair and... oh, wait, hang on...'

At least Draco didn't have a scar.

\*

The news got out pretty fast that Ronald Weasley had a magic rat.



That is to say, they told Parvati, and suddenly everyone knew.

And suddenly the corridors was packed with people pushing Harry Potter aside to see Ron Weasley and the Amazing Fluffy.

'Hands off, Hufflepuffs,' Draco snapped. 'No manhandling. You idiot, Weasley, they're going to drop me! I'm telling you, if they get this excited over a rat, their lives must be pathetically empty... wait, we're talking about Hufflepuffs here. Never mind.'

Weasley grinned with moronic pride every time someone asked to hold Draco, and then watched them like a neurotic hawk while they did so. He even managed to stop Longbottom dropping Draco, which led Draco to believe Weasley must be far more magically talented than he had ever given him credit for.

This led to Weasley being shockingly late for class all the time, which was at least good for a laugh.

He was racing towards Herbology when he slammed into a wall.

Wait, no, Draco thought. My mistake.

It was Crabbe and Goyle.

The Slytherins had arrived to show a spot of interest in the magic rat too.

Draco wondered desperately if this interest might be harmless, and then was insulted at the thought that people had been training for years could ever, in any circumstances, be harmless.

'Oh, Weasley,' piped Goyle in a falsetto. 'Can we play with the rat?'

Goyle had twice Crabbe's braincells. Well, two was twice one, after all.

Crabbe merely grunted.

Wonderful, Draco thought. I'm going to be crushed to death by my own minions. Bitter, bitter irony!

'No,' said Weasley.

Was he crazy? All right, he was tall, and not that badly built, but Crabbe and Goyle could have picked him up and tossed him like a salad in a sieve.

They were probably going to, as well.

And me, Draco realised, touched with cold fear.

Which exploded into panic as Crabbe's fist exploded into Weasley's face.

'No!' Draco shouted. 'Beating people up is the sort of thing that gets you caught and then gets you expelled, idiots! Have I taught you nothing! Besides, it's..'

Wrong...

'Me!'

I did not just have that other thought.

Weasley fell down and Draco streaked out from his hands, between Crabbe and Goyle's feet, towards...

Another pair of feet, hiding around the corner.

I know those feet! Those were the feet in the bathroom when I changed!

Which means this is...

Oh God, what am I supposed to do? Headbutt him in the toe? Rat gives himself mild concussion running into enemy's shoe?

Fearsome.

Draco waited until a hand reached out for him, and then he did something he had sworn he would never ever do.

He bit down.

Bleagh, bleagh, tastes of plastic and Muggle artefacts. Oh, for some Magicmouthwash!

Then he ran, ran, ran down the corridors, ran until he felt a hand seize him and lift him up to...

A worried face. A cloud of hair.

'Fluffy?' said Granger.

He could have kissed her.

Except for his current lipless situation.

He opened his mouth to insult her and rail at her about his life, and generally make himself feel better.

'Come and help Ron!'

This extraordinarily selfless speech of Draco's did absolutely no good, of course, because Hermione had no idea what he was saying.

'Where's Ron?' she asked wonderingly. 'Oh, well. Let's go find him.'

She looked as if she was considering putting him down.

She had mentioned Ron as soon as he had...

'Yes, put me down,' Draco said urgently. 'I know where Ron is.'

She put him down! And she ran after him when he ran, although that was possibly out of fear that she was going to lose Ron's precious rat, and so she came upon Ron just as Crabbe and Goyle were kicking him unconscious.

'Stop!' shouted Draco, in the ringing Malfoy tones of command.

Crabbe and Goyle hesitated for just a second, as if they aware of something just on the cusp of hearing.

And Granger shouted, 'Petrificus Totalus!'

Then she dropped to her knees beside Ron.

'Oh, Ron... what... why... Why didn't you use magic on them?'

Ron spoke through battered lips. 'Oh come on, Herm. When guys start a fight with fists, it'd be pretty sissy to whip out a wand...'

'So what?' Draco said irritably. 'He who fights dirty survives, and gets to lie about the battles afterwards.'

It was a Malfoy motto, right after 'Loot, Pillage, Burn!' and 'In the Name of the Dark Lord Insert-Name-Here!'

'You stupid git,' he added.

'I'll get Madame Pomfrey,' Granger told him. 'Oh, they sure took you to the cleaner's...'

'They took him behind the cleaner's and then beat him up with the cleaner's garbage cans,' Draco corrected her.

Which was when Ron, lying bloody on the ground, said,

'Is Fluffy all right?'

Granger sighed in exasperation. 'Yes, Fluffy's all right. Fluffy led me here.'

Ron's face split into a grin.

'Isn't he *cool*?'

\*

Granger, who had been petting Draco quite often since his dramatic rescue of Ron, volunteered to take care of him while Ron was in the infirmary, since Madam Pomfrey refused to let him stay there. She said rats were unhygienic, to Ron and Draco's mutual outrage.

'Be careful of him,' Ron said anxiously. 'He likes to be cuddled.'

'No I bloody *don't*, Weasley.'

'He needs affection.'

'You need a girlfriend.'

Granger promised to be careful with him, and carried him up to the Gryffindor girls' room, where - surprise, surprise! - she began to do her homework.

Right after switching on a little machine, which piped at Draco,

'Do you believe in love at first sight?'

'Yes, I was introduced to mirrors at an early age...' Draco returned.

'Yes I'm certain that it happens all the time...'

It was ... music. Some form of Muggle... music.

Except it was different from music, more, sort of...

Fun.

It had a catchy little tune. Draco wished he could dance a bit, since he was quite a good dancer... unlike the Boy Who Had Two Left Feet.

Well, since Granger wasn't looking...

Draco got up onto his two back paws and began to do a little cha-cha that was part keeping his balance, part getting down with his funky rat self.

'Yeah I get by with a little help from my friends,

Oh yeah I get high with a little help from my friends'

He got quite into it.

When he opened his poor unsuspecting rat eyes and found Hermione, Parvati and Lavender all staring at him.

Besottedly.

Oh, bugger.

'Oh, the cutie!' squeaked Lavender. 'Make him do it again!'

'Nobody makes a Malfoy do anything, madam,' Draco informed her coldly.

He had his dignity. He may have just been caught wiggling his little furry behind to the sound of Muggle music, but he still had his dignity...

Right?

'Dance for us, Fluffy,' coaxed Parvati.

His father had said the day would come when girls would beg him. He just hadn't mentioned this whole rat thing.

'I will do no such thing!'

Granger was considering him, a small smile on her face.

'You know,' she said, 'he is terribly precious.'

On the other paw, Draco was nothing if not an exhibitionist. And if girls were clustered around him imploring him to shake his sexy booty, well, it would be something to tell his grandchildren.

He got up on his back paws again.

And as the girls squealed in delight (ha! His father had said he seriously doubted this would happen, and look, it was so easy) Draco considered Ron.

Weasley.

Ron.

He'd been thinking of him as Ron ever since he hit the floor, anyway. It had been a damn fool and just-too-Gryffindor-ish thing to do, getting himself beaten up by Crabbe and Goyle, but it had been...

Nice.

Draco was not a big fan of nice, but then Draco rarely had it directed towards him. It wasn't - entirely a bad feeling.

Besides, he owed the stupid git now. Even if he was poor and had that awful hair and some kind of rodent obsession. He wasn't that bad a guy.

Once Draco got back to his old self, there would be the devil to pay for Crabbe and Goyle.

Worse still, the Malfoy.

Anyway, Draco thought, perking up, I was wasting far too much time torturing Weasley anyway. I should have fixed my concentration on Potter. With my personal, twenty-four hour attention, he should be in St Mungo's before New Year's.

Ahahaha.

You evil genius, Draco, he told himself, and twirled prettily to the sound of 'I Believe in Angels.'

~~~~~

Chapter Three

Teenage Boys Are Animals

*This is not real
This is not real
This is not really happening
You bet your life it is
You bet your life it is
You bet your life...*

Once Hermione - uh, Granger - had him in her care, Draco was faced with an entirely different changing room dilemma.

I won't look, he told himself with dignity. It's beneath me as a Malfoy. We may rape, pillage, loot and burn, but we are not Peeping Toms.

Except for Uncle Ethelfride, but nobody ever talks about him in public.

We especially do not peep at Gryffindors.

Parvati Patil's underclothes narrowly missed hitting his head.

All right, what is this, some kind of strip show? Why am I being tempted beyond the power of rat to resist? Dirty, dirty Gryffindors. It was obscene. They should all be locked up.

Eeeew, it would be bestiality. That's against all laws of god and man!

Well, not Uncle Ethelfride's gods, but again, nobody ever talks about that.

Couldn't they have kept him outside after flying lessons? But no, no, they had to keep precious Fluffy with them...

Damn my irresistible Malfoy charms! If only Grandma hadn't been a Veela...

'Whoops, towel slipped,' Parvati giggled.

I will be strong, Draco chanted to himself. I will be strong.

'Can anyone see my top?' Granger demanded.

Bugger being strong, I'm looking. I'm **so** looking.

Draco turned around and beheld Ron Weasley.

'Gahhhh!'

'AHHHHHHHH!' screamed a dozen Gryffindor girls.

'Bjargle!' said Ronald Weasley, ladies' man, and turned scarlet. 'I - I'm really sorry, everyone - Hermione - Parvati-'

Hermione was clutching her gym bag to her chest. Parvati had a death grip on her towel.

'I was just let out of the infirmary - I wanted to see Fluffy...'

God damn, Draco thought. He actually seems to be telling the truth.

That's it, he is gay.

'Take him and go!' screeched Parvati.

Ron lumbered over and picked up Draco. Draco was furious that his own personal show had been stopped, but he was also sort of touched that the big stupid lunk was better and had gone looking for him, so he didn't squirm that much.

Hermione's lip was sticking out just a little bit.

'He likes to watch the Weakest Link,' she told Ron. 'But you haven't got a TV...'

Draco had discovered TV just after the radio, and had been entranced.

Oh, blow, he thought. I'm going to miss my soaps.

'JUST GO!' screamed the female Gryffindors, en masse.

Draco couldn't be sure, but he thought as Ron carried him out Granger might have blown him a kiss.

*

'Wasn't that embarrassing?' inquired Ron, who was still pink.

'You big pillock,' Draco snapped. 'That was naked girls. That was fun. Honestly, if you don't stop being so bashful... Let's face it - no looks, no money, and a soul-stirring love life involving one date with Padma Patil, a handful of dates with Granger and looking at that Delacour bint a lot. Nobody's running after you.'

'Ron! Ron, wait!'

'Oooh, I spoke too soon.'

Chasing after Ron Weasley was the siren of the seventh year, the raunch puppet of the Ravensclaws, the don't-we-all-wish-she-was-really-a-head-girl Head Girl, Cho 'The Charmer' Chang.

Draco wasn't that into short girls, but he knew her by reputation and all the sneaked photos in the Slytherin common room. The girl who had that heroic and severely deceased Hufflepuff as a lost love, and Potter following her around like a scarred puppy begging to be put down for three years.

Draco was beginning to doubt his judgment. There must be something to Ron Weasley he'd overlooked.

Ron's ears were re-dyed scarlet with amazing speed.

'I, uh, Cho!'

'Yeah, that's her name. Full marks,' Draco observed.

Cho Chang looked at him with her great big shiny eyes and smiled that bright full-mouthed smile.

Ron was mauve by now.

'I was wondering, could I stroke your-'

'Steady on, girl!' said Draco.

'Rat?' finished Cho.

'Uh - yeah. Yeah, sure,' Ron mumbled. 'Um, his name's Flumpy. Fluffy! Fluffy!'

'Flumpy?' Draco repeated, in dreadful tones.

'I know his name,' Cho said, taking Draco and beginning to pet him. She was a bit reckless about it, if you asked him. Not a girl with a gentle touch. 'Everyone's talking about Ron Weasley and his amazing rat.'

'Rawly? I mean - really?' stuttered Ron.

'You silver-tongued devil,' Draco said, rolling his eyes.

Cho fell into step with Ron.

'So how does it feel, joining the most talked about club?' She sighed. 'Not as pleasant as it seems, is it?'

'I, uh, I think you'd better ask Harry,' Ron muttered.

'Oh, for Heaven's sake, Weasley. If a troop of Veelas in negligees came and bounced on your bed asking if there was anything they could do for you I think you'd say 'no, but why don't you ask Harry?'

'Modest, modest,' said Cho, not put off. 'No, Harry's always been famous... but suddenly having everyone looking at you... assuming they know you - It's a bit off-putting, isn't it?'

'Well, he's just a rat, I'm not overwhelmingly famous yet,' Ron pointed out, getting out a coherent sentence to the incredulous delight of the audience.

'No...' said Cho. 'I don't know why, I just thought you'd understand... Do you know, I haven't been asked out on a date in two years?'

'Scumrfy?' said Ron, losing all control of his tongue.

'Prat!' howled Draco to the nothingness.

'Either they think I'm destined to be Harry Potter's, or...' Cho looked at her feet. 'I'm just - tired of it. I thought you might understand.'

'Or you thought he might hand out some of that weaselish hot stuff you seem to want.'

'I - I do,' Ron assured her hurriedly.

Cho smiled her dazzling future-Witch-Weekly-model smile. 'I'm so glad we had this talk.'

'He didn't talk that much,' Draco pointed out.

Cho let Draco fall gently into Ron's outstretched hands. They ended up looking deeply into each others' eyes.

'Uh - Weasley, I'm all for you getting some, but I don't want to be crushed in between a passionate clinch... Mind the rat...'

'Ronald Weasley! Cho Chang!'

If it wasn't Professor McI'maVirginandBitter,Okay?

Or McGonagall... whichever...

Cho went bright red and hurried off. Ron looked wretchedly guilty. Professor McSpoilSport looked scandalised.

Draco wondered whether Murphy, that vicious bastard, actually hated **everyone**.

*

The next day Ron was confiding all his troubles to Draco.

'Get a real pet,' Draco advised. 'Get a girlfriend. Get a diary, for God's sake, but stop bothering me!'

'How could I?' Ron wailed, extremely softly. 'I was - well, I wasn't going to do anything, obviously! Harry's my best friend!'

'Get a new best friend,' Draco counselled. 'Cho's a lot better looking than Potter. Plus, this may be your only chance.'

Ron was glancing over at Potter and Hermione, who were happily playing Exploding Snap.

'He's liked her for three years!' he murmured in distraught tones.

'That's his problem. In fact, that's his full-blown stalkerish obsession. Not yours.'

Draco couldn't believe all this Gryffindorish crap. Forget the fact that he was Draco Malfoy, and that except for the fact he had all the letters in his name the word 'moral' had nothing to do with him. He happened to know that Weasley hadn't had a date since the beginning of fifth year, when Weasley and Granger had had their extremely brief liaison.

Not that he'd been paying attention, at all, but it'd been hard to miss when Granger jumped up at breakfast time and yelled that she couldn't go out with Ron because he was jealous and controlling and she couldn't stand fighting any longer.

Draco had a private theory that she hadn't been able to stand looking at that red hair anymore.

Not that he'd cared.

At all.

In any way whatsoever.

'What am I going to do?' Ron demanded.

Parvati Patil ran in. 'Professor McGonagall wants to see all the fifth and sixth years immediately!'

The answer appeared to be: Die of embarrassment.

'Oh no!' Ron agonised. 'Oh my God, what is she going to say?'

*

The answer appeared to be - not much.

Professor McGonagall appeared to be more interested in her shoes than her students.

'I,' she commented. 'That is, very. Come glad that you could. Talk that if you might. Want.'

'What?' whispered Gina Weasley, who was sitting by her brother and ruffling Draco's fur.

At least, he thought it was Gina. Something like that, anyway.

'An incident has made me, er, think,' Professor McGonagall continued.

The same incident made Ronald Weasley squirm.

'So I thought this might be an opportune. I, that is. Professor Snape with me agreed.'

Draco toyed with the idea that she had proposed to Snape and been accepted. Then he thought of the wedding night and felt his mind's eye burn.

'Er. That is - ahem.' Professor McIncoherent coughed. 'Well. Mothers tell stories about storks and Cabbage Patch Charms. But uh, surprisingly...'

Mass mystification among the Gryffindors.

'Not true,' mumbled Professor McBabbling.

'What the hell is she talking about?' Ron whispered to Granger, who shook her head.

The poor, innocent little Gryffindors were completely lost.

Luckily for them, they had Draco Malfoy in their midst. His mind worked a little bit differently.

'Sex!' he shouted.

Which shout must have twigged something in an unconscious, just as his shout had triggered a response in Crabbe and Goyle, because just then someone leaped to their feet.

'Sex!' shouted the Boy Who Looked Like An Idiot in Front of Everyone.

Gina Weasley's mouth dropped open.

Professor McGonagall blushed like a schoolgirl.

'Ah, yes. Mr Potter. That's correct. Uh, if you'd - sit down-'

'Can she honestly think we don't know?' whispered Hermione to a Ron who was convulsed with silent laughter.

'Well, you lot **are** Gryffindors,' Draco observed. 'Anyway, this is all undoubtedly coming as a bit of an eye-opener for Longbottom.'

Hermione put up her hand.

'Professor, should we be taking notes? Is this on a test?'

'I - uh, no...' Professor McHumiliatedtotheDust muttered.

Hermione was in full swing now. 'Is there going to be a practical demonstration?'

Ron choked and fell off his seat.

'I, uh - issue of... Protection,' mumbled Professor McPretendingSheHadn'tHeardThat.

Longbottom's hand shot up.

'Like a Patronus Charm, professor?'

'More like an anti-Paternus Charm,' Draco muttered.

'I - uh, yes, Neville, but uh... in a more accurate way... well, no...' Professor McMumbling went on, interrupted at intervals by questions.

'Did you just say a **condo**?'

'Sorry, I was in the bathroom - a wand, a balloon - is this a party trick?'

'By be prepared, should we lay out ingredients?'

Draco's personal high point of the lecture was when Parvati Patil, who hadn't been paying much attention, asked if that 'mime' was even possible and if McGonagall had ever tried it at home.

Ron was lying on the ground, gasping weakly. Potter was still blushing whenever Gina Weasley glanced over at him.

Hermione was taking notes.

'Hey, hang on a minute...' Draco said. 'Professor Snape has to be doing this, too...'

Ron propped himself up on one elbow.

'Snape,' he muttered. His face split into a disbelieving grin. 'Oy, Harry - **Snape.**'

Potter caught on right away.

'Oh, we couldn't,' he grinned.

'Oh yes you could,' Draco said. 'You must!'

Hermione, Ron and Potter left quite quickly after that.

Of course, Ron took his Fluffy along.

*

'An **invisibility** cloak?' murmured Draco from under it. 'I knew I wasn't seeing floating heads! I **wondered** why you people never got caught. You lucky, jammy Gryffindors, an invisibility cloak...'

Hermione, Ron and Potter were a bit of a tight fit under the cloak. Draco wondered idly if either of the boys had enough Slytherinish spine in them to be taking this opportunity to cop a feel.

He doubted it.

The Gryffindors were stopped short in front of the Slytherin dungeons, pondering in agitated whispers about how they were going to get in without a password.

Typical Gryffindors, never thinking ahead.

'Deadly Nightshade,' conjectured Hermione. 'Hail the Dark Lord. Salazar Slytherin.'

Draco coughed.

'Good guesses all, but actually it's 'Blaise Zabini Is A Tart.' We're going to come up with something suitably sinister soon!' he added hastily.

'Blaise Zabini Is A Tart,' Granger said automatically.

The entrance opened.

'Wow, good **guess**, Hermione,' said Harry Poofter.

Draco was sick of never getting any credit.

They all crept in, unwittingly guided by Draco's directions to the Slytherin assembly room.

Where stood Snape, who was blushing purple beneath his long and unwashed locks.

'I don't **get** it, Professor,' whined Crabbe.

'I don't think you're explaining it right,' Goyle added plaintively.

Potter had to hold Ron up at this point.

'I **know** you're not explaining it right,' murmured Blaise Zabini.

Millicent Bulstrode put her hand up.

'Sir?'

'Yes, Miss Bulstrode?'

'The Gryffindors are learning this too, right?'

'Yes, Miss Bulstrode.' Snape's voice was weary.

'Harry Potter, too?'

'Yes, for the seventh time, Miss Bulstrode.'

'Oh.' Millicent's eyes went unfocused with lust. 'Wow.'

Granger had to hold up Potter, who seemed in danger of fainting away in horror.

'Anyway,' Snape said testily, 'if anyone has any questions which do not involve Harry Potter... or Draco Malfoy, that means you, Mr Goyle...'

'Ewwwwwww!'

'Yes, Ms. Zabini?'

'Can they involve Harry Potter **and** Draco Malfoy, sir?'

'Ewwwwwww!'

'Certainly not!'

'Let's go,' Draco urged. 'I came here to mock, not to be traumatised...'

'Sir, if you had a toad and...'

'I believe that's illegal, Mr Nott... Yes, even in Sweden! Does nobody in my house have any interest in a healthy relationship?'

'Sir?'

'Yes, Ms. Zabini?'

'What are **you** doing after this lecture?'

Ron made a simmering sound behind his hands. Potter and Granger had to drag him away.

*

The next day, classes were back to normal.

At least, that was the intention...

Professor McGonagall had no sooner walked up to her desk than Draco decided to take evil advantage of his possession of the unconscious plane.

'Ohhhhhhh, McGonagall...' he called.

'Open at page 32,' she said crisply.

'McGonagall, remember what you were talking to these kids about yesterday.'

McGonagall went slightly pink.

'They're remembering it too...'

'Miss Granger, open a window please...'

'They're all thinking about it! They can't stop thinking about it! They're all staring at you!'

'What are you gawping at, Longbottom? Oh - I'm sorry, forgive me...'

'Especially the boys,' Draco continued relentlessly. 'You know boys - simmering, bubbling, unpredictable little things... you lit the fuse and now the sex bomb's about to go off... You can't trust boys. You don't know what teenage boys are thinking. Or rather, you know **exactly** what they're thinking...'

McGonagall darted an outraged look at a frankly bewildered Seamus Finnegan.

'They're evil little sex maniacs!'

'Sex maniacs...' muttered the professor, wiping sweat from her brow.

'Sorry, Professor?' said Ron.

'He heard you...' murmured Draco. 'Ahahaha! They all heard you. Teenage boys are animals!'

Professor McGonagall fled. Everyone had a very nice free class, which was spent mainly in petting the adorable Fluffy.

Draco luxuriated under Granger's caress.

'At least, some of them are,' he smirked.

~~~~~



## **Chapter Four**

### **The Gryffindor Mascot**

It happened at breakfast time, when Ron was trying to slip Draco an espresso without Hermione noticing.

'Oh, Ron!' she sighed. 'You didn't buy that. I'm sure it can't be good for him.'

Draco had, in desperation, raided the dregs of Hermione's coffee cup. Ron had discovered him, and now Hermione's life was a campaign to stop Ron spending his last penny to feed his pet's caffeine obsession.

'Quiet, woman,' ordered Draco, doing his best not to scramble into the cup. 'What do you know about it? I like it. It makes me feel good.'

Mmmm, coffee. Life-giver.

'I want a little milk, too,' he said in imperious tones.

Ron lifted the milk carton and Draco fell into his espresso.

On the carton was... himself. Simply himself.

Tall and white-blond, in a formal picture wearing his black dress-robos and with his wand dangling casually from his fingers. His head was flung back and he had a disdainful expression on his face that, in Draco's opinion, made him look devastating.

Not that this was anything new.

Ron gazed at the picture with dreamy distraction that Draco understood but was extremely disturbed by.

'Malfoy's still missing,' he said, looking as if he wanted to vomit with glee.

Hermione glanced at the picture. 'I thought he was supposed to be in one of the family's holiday homes?'

'Nah,' Ron waxed expansive in his happiness. 'Dumbledore contacted Malfoy's father, and his dad said he had probably run off to one of their holiday homes. Imagine, he didn't even bother to check! If it hadn't been for Snape going ballistic and running a check - bane of my existence that he is - Malfoy would never have been missed.'

Hermione's nose wrinkled. 'You mean - he's just gone? Really gone? But it's been nearly three weeks now!'

Ron sighed blissfully. 'Best three weeks of my life.'

'But something terrible could have happened to him.'

'Hermione, don't get my hopes up. The disappointment would crush me.'

Hermione sighed, but to Draco's outrage did not appear unduly concerned by his own possibly tragic fate.

But then, why should she? he thought. When Father...

He's very busy, he reminded himself. He always is. Besides, it's \*Muggles\* and vermin like Weasleys who get coddled when they're brought up. He gets me presents, doesn't he?

Affection is a poor substitute for material goods. Rule 328 of the Malfoy Code.

And he - spends time with me. Ordering me to join the Voldemort Youth, and all that. Which undoubtedly makes up for the fact that they're both so cold and self-obsessed they wouldn't notice if I dropped dead.

Whoo bloody hoo.

'Awww, Fluffikins,' Ron fussed. 'Your gorgeous fur is all manky with coffee. Come on, we've got to get you a bath.'

Draco snapped out of it.

'You are not bathing me, Ron! No! I mean it! Keep your hands to yourself!'

Hermione ate her egg with callous calm as Ron seized Draco in his merciless grip, and gave him one of his crude and vehement pettings.

Vermin like the Weasleys...

Draco blinked, for some reason.

He was slightly cheered by observing, as Ron carried him off, that Lavender and Parvati had just breakfasted on nutritious cups of milk, bowls of milk and toast made nice and soggy with milk, and were now getting into a bitch fight about who got to have the picture on the empty carton.

He had a suspicion that they were going to paste him inside their lockers.

\*

Ron was carrying a damp and disgruntled Draco back in his shirt when he went crashing into Cho Chang.

'Urgklekuh,' said Ron, which had not been how their conversations started when Ron was practising them with Draco reluctantly cast in the part of Cho.

Cho smiled as if this was a masterstroke of wit.

'Ron! Just the boy I wanted to see.'

'No wonder Ravenclaw sucks at Quidditch,' Draco commented to the air. 'Their Seeker needs glasses.'

Ron swept some red hair off his brow, trying desperately to look casual, and poked himself in the eye.

'Arghargh!'

Draco rolled his eyes.

'I... was wondering if you'd like to walk me to class?' Cho inquired delicately, going a little pink.

'Forgotten your way, have you?' Draco asked sweetly. 'And they say Ravenclaws are smart.'

'I, uh. Sure. Where is it?' Ron wanted to know.

'With that smooth talk, you must have to beat them off with a broomstick,' Draco commented.

Cho put her little hand on Ron's large one. Her long black lashes swept her cheek in a way that made Ron swallow and look faint.

'I'll show you,' she said.

'Down, girl,' Draco put in severely. 'The corridor is no place to strip.'

'Uh, I, I... great,' Ron answered. Then the red, excited, embarrassed flush in his cheeks faded. 'I - wait. Harry.'

'That's not her name,' Draco told him.

'Cho - he's my best friend.'

'Apologise for it \*later\*!' Draco howled. 'No. You're not doing this. I will not let you do this. Do you realise that this could be your only chance ever, and then you could... ugh, get all twisted and bitter, and end up dying with me in a room with a rat as your only friend! And that would be funny, except I would be that rat!'

'I need to-' Ron began, looking miserable but determined.

'Kiss her,' Draco ordered.

Ron stiffened, his ears suddenly flaring scarlet. He stopped talking and stared at Cho.

Draco got enthused.

'Smooch the girl. Give her an amateur tonsillectomy. Land her one. Shower her with affectionate salutations, seize her in your arms, waggle her about and say 'You are my mate, dash it!' Give her a big wet one! ... Huh, innuendo.'

Ron leaned towards Cho, looking as if he was not at all certain this was a good idea, and he expected Cho to shriek and slap him across the face... but looking like he really, really wanted to.

Cho blushed a little and leaned in.

Ron hesitated.

'Oh, just snog the girl already!'

Ron did. There was a small awkward pause, and then Ron's arms went around the small dark girl and gathered her up towards him.

There was a long, involved pause.

'... can't breathe... crushed,' said a small voice nobody heard. '... going to bloody die of oxygen deprivation, Weasley, you selfish bastard...'

Cho's arm slipped around his neck.

'... of course, you might go the same way...' Draco added.

Ron sighed and Cho kissed his jawline.

'Tease,' noted Draco, kiss connoisseur.

Then she moved to his neck.

'Oooh, vixen!'

Which was when another passionate lip-lock ensued.

'... squashed into ratty pulp...' Draco desperately tried to get some air. '... still cute, though... all right, all right, come on now, kids, it's time for class, can't miss it, those fascinating Magical Creatures won't wait around all day. A Blasted Blast-Ended Skrewt may be pining for you.'

Draco began to pray for anything which could break these two up.

O'Toole's law - Murphy was an optimist.

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived - Worse Luck! - came around a corner.

'Ron, you're going to be...'

'Damn you, O'Toole!' Draco said violently into the emptiness.

Potter stared. Cho and Ron sprang apart. All of them stood looking at each other.

'Bugger me, this is awkward,' Draco remarked cheerfully in the miserable silence.

'Um, Harry,' Ron began wretchedly. 'I wasn't-'

'Kissing her,' Draco explained ingenuously. 'She just dropped something - uh, in her mouth, and he was helping her look for it.'

Ron paused and frowned as if he was having bizarre thoughts.

'Oh, don't let me interrupt,' Potter said in a strange, tight voice. 'You looked so very busy.'

Then he turned and walked into the Gryffindor entrance, where the Fat Lady had been getting an eyeful.

Ron stared at Cho with a look of horror on his face.

'Oh God, Cho,' he exclaimed. 'I don't know why I did that.'

'Could it be a) raging teen hormones b) you really like her and see her as a special human being or c) a mad rat has you under his evil sway?'

'I guess I just... I really, really like you, but...'

'Wrong answer! You are the Weakest Link! Goodbye!' said Draco, who had been watching too many game shows.

'I - I'm sorry, Ron,' said Cho, turning and fleeing down the corridor.

'Follow the girl, follow the girl,' Draco advised urgently. 'You're not likely to get a snog from Potter... ew, vivid mental picture...'

Ron sighed, squared his shoulders and walked into the Gryffindor room.

O'Toole, you bastard!

With Draco's luck, Ron *would* snog Potter.

\*

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lurked, was standing in the Gryffindor common room.

'Clearly waiting for you,' Draco sniffed. 'Wants a scene.'

'Look, Harry...' Ron began. 'I want to apologise - it was an accident-'

'Oh, you tripped and fell on her lips?' Harry inquired coldly. 'Maybe you were put under the Imperius Curse by someone anxious to see young things getting it on? Could this be a dastardly plan of Voldemort's?'

'Could be,' Draco agreed ingenuously. 'Could very well be. Or Cho could have slipped him a Mickey Finn.'

'No,' Ron said miserably. 'No, look... It's this way. I really like Cho-'

'Oh, of course,' Harry snapped. 'Like you really liked Fleur, and Padma Patil, and Lavendar, and Hermione-'

'Don Juan Weasley,' Draco said, and shuddered. 'Never let me think that again.'

'Listen, Harry, just because I haven't been obsessed for three years doesn't mean I can't care about her,' Ron snapped. 'Just because you like her doesn't mean she can never have a relationship.'

'No,' Harry said bitterly. 'But I did think that my best friend would keep away from her - would have some kind of consideration for my feelings. Couldn't you have thought about me?'

'While he was kissing Cho?' Draco inquired. 'Nasty concept.'

'Harry... I never intended to hurt you-'

Potter, the Boy Who Whinged, was not paying attention.

'Ron... you have this great family, you have happiness, you have everything. Couldn't you have left me this one thing?'

'Women aren't things!' said Ron, who had obviously never read Rule 117 of the Malfoy Code.

Harry's lips set into a straight line.

'You know, Ron, when Malfoy told me not to mix with the wrong sort of people - maybe he was being smart.'

'No I wasn't!' Draco yelled. 'I was being an asshole!'

Good Lord, had he really just said that?

'I don't want to speak to you anymore,' Harry continued coldly.

'When will you want to speak to me?' Ron asked.

'Never,' Harry answered.

'Hmmm...' said Draco. 'I don't know, Ron. Is never good for us?'

'Harry, don't be thick... we have that match against Slytherin tomorrow...'

Potter's eyes flashed behind his nerdy little glasses.

'Then I'll speak to you when I absolutely have to... Beater.'

He turned and ran up the stairs.

Ron leaned his head against the wall.

'Well, that went well,' Draco remarked.

\*

Next day, Draco was too concerned with his own problems to worry about Ron's.

'Sitting on the Gryffindor side,' he said crossly. 'Watching Malcolm bloody Baddock taking my place as Slytherin Seeker. I might as well be a Gryffindor. Pause, marvel, shudder at the concept.'

Hermione had him in her lap and was sitting between Lavender and Parvati. Lavender and Parvati's touches were frankly becoming a bit intrusive.

'Bubble space, girls,' Draco grumbled. 'We Malfoys are used to fawning women, but moderation in all things.'

'Ooody burble goo,' cooed Lavender. 'You precious, precious thing.'

'I'm really sorry someone hit a Bludger at your head when you were a child,' Draco snapped, squirming away.

However, he could have done with a bit more attention from Hermione. She was looking terribly faraway. She was clearly concerned about Ron and the Boy Who Lived To Make Things Difficult.

'Hey, Herm, is it true about Ron and Ch-' began Parvati, when suddenly a boy came dashing through the stands to Hermione.

He had a camera slung about his neck, and Draco vaguely recognised him. He was a Gryffindor who had recently been made the team photographer. His name was Goblin Greevey, or something.

'Hermione! Hermione!' he shouted. 'I'll take Fluffy. You have to come and do something. It's all my fault. I mentioned Cho Chang, and now Harry and Ron are fighting! And the match is starting!'

The stands were electrified.

'Oh no,' said Hermione. 'Oh no, what shall I do?'

'My Slytherin sneakiness says stall,' Draco suggested. 'Buggered if I know how, though.'

'I've got to stall,' decided Hermione. 'But... I know! Fluffy!'

'What? Me? What?'

Hermione stood up in her seat.

'Accio loudspeaker! Accio radio!'

The items came whizzing towards her, one right out of the hands of a very surprised Millicent Bulstrode, who had taken Lee Jordan's place as commentator - though Jordan had never talked so much about how Potter looked in his Quidditch robes.

Draco considered her an invaluable weapon for the Slytherin side.

'Ladies and gentlemen, and those on the Slytherin side!' Hermione shouted. 'I - uh, before the match, I request you to lend your attention to the performance of - er - the new Gryffindor mascot!'

'You blasted woman!' Draco said with deep conviction.

Now he bloody was on the Gryffindor team.

'He will now dance for us,' declared Hermione.

'Oh, will he? Think again, missy,' Draco told her severely. 'I won't be part of the Gryffindor team, and I certainly won't be the rodent equivalent of a Gryffindor cheerleader!'

Which was when Hermione switched on the radio, and it began to play one of the Insects' (or Beetles) songs.

Draco's very favourites!

'Oh, you fiend of cunning,' Draco groused.

'Lucy in the sky with diamonds...' carolled the radio.

Well, maybe just a few steps... All right, just a flick of the tail... ooooh, listen to the crowds scream!

'Yes! Yes!' said Draco, after his encore with 'Hey Jude' and having thoroughly gotten down with his funky rat self. 'You love me! You really love me!'

He was vaguely disappointed when the Gryffindor team jogged out at last. Ron, sporting the latest in fashionable cut lips, stopped by the stands to thank Hermione and admire Draco.



'Well, my smart little boy,' he crooned. 'Since you're the Gryffindor mascot now-'

'There's no need to start calling names,' Draco snapped.

'You should fly with us,' Ron continued, scooping Draco up and placing him in his pocket.

'Ron, no!' said Hermione.

'Ron, you imbecile, I will visit the curse of the Malfoys upon you!' shrieked Draco. 'No. You're not to. I insist upon it. Ron, the penalty I will make you pay will be whispered by demons in the darkness, recorded in Books of Pain... you just put me in your pocket, do you know where I can bite you now? Ron, I'm a tiny rat, if I fall I will splatter on the Quidditch pitch...'

Ron launched off into endless space.

Part of the Gryffindors, Draco thought. Unloved by my family. A rat. Quite definitely about to die. What did I ever do to deserve this?

Well, yes, but apart from all that stuff.

\*

Panic was fading for Draco now. His feet were cold, and Ron's pocket was decidedly uncomfortable, and the Slytherins were messing up so badly that the score was 20-180 to the Gryffindors, but at least Potter looked miserable and he was getting a black eye.

Mmm, shiny silver lining.

Draco was peeping out his pocket to get another sight of the dejected boy when Ron's broomstick jolted violently and almost tipped him out.

Panic, Draco's familiar friend, came rushing back after its quickie cigarette break.

'Bugger! Watch it!'

Ron's broomstick spun around as Ron's hand went to clutch at his pocket.

'Both hands on the broomstick or we both die!' Draco shouted, the world tipping over. As it turned, he saw Potter's face go ashen, and Hermione and camera-boy staring up at Ron with fixed terror.

The broomstick careened downwards and Ron let go of the pocket, grasping the stick to jerk it upwards.

Which was when Draco fell out.

There was a dazed moment when Draco thought, Whee. I'm flying.

Then he realised he was about to become Draco Malfoy, the amazing splatting rat.

Until Ron shouted incoherently, twisted the broom around and smacked onto the ground. There was a sickening thump.

Draco landed on him, the redhead effectively breaking his fall.

'Ron!' screamed Potter and Hermione in terrified unison.

And Draco, who had never felt scared for anybody in his life before, stared at his pale still face and gasped,

'Is he dead? Oh God, is he dead?'

Potter landed beside Ron so quickly it was a miracle there wasn't another accident. Draco looked at the boy dazedly and realised Harry was crying.

He wondered in a strange, distracted fashion if he had ever cried for anyone else in his entire life.

'Ron,' sobbed out Potter. 'Oh God, Ron, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Please don't be dead, I don't care about Cho, I don't care about anything...'

Ron's eyes opened a slit.

Draco felt swamped by relief.

'Look after Fluffy,' he croaked as Madam Pomfrey's aides came onto the field to pick him up.

'All right, Ron,' said Draco, 'clearly you hit your head a bit too hard...'

'Of course, of course,' Harry answered, seizing Draco in his filthy paws. 'You're going to be just fine, Ron...'

That might well be. But Draco, on top of unwelcome rodentdom, on top of being the damned damned Gryffindor mascot, was now in the power of his arch- nemesis.

Draco was not going to be fine.

And once he got his hands on Murphy and O'Toole, those bastards were dead.

~~~~~

Chapter Five

The Boy Who Wasn't So Bad After All

If you want my heart take it

I'm not using it anyway...

'Unhand me, Potter,' Draco ordered. 'You utter, utter pratly prat. Release me from your frankly suspicious tight grasp. I wish to go to Hermione. She likes me. She'll let me watch my soaps and listen to my music and she won't poison me.'

Harry Potter, the hero who conquered the Dark Lord and yet who could not obey simple instructions, kept a tight hold on Draco.

'I don't trust you,' he whispered. 'But I'll do what Ron wants.'

'Potter, your slavery to the Weasley wiles does no credit to your taste. And what's the matter with you, you mad paranoid bastard? You don't *trust* me? I'm an itty, bitty rat. What are the chances that one of Weasley's pets is going to turn evil?'

Just for that, he was peeing in Potter's underwear drawer.

Oh no, he *hadn't* just had that thought. He was going totally rodent. No matter how pathetic Voldemort's plans for vengeance on Harry Potter were, that had never even been on the list. Malfoys had far too much dignity to ever think about using their enemies' chest of drawers as toilets.

Oh, yes, fine, always excepting Uncle Ethelfride.

Draco tried to crush the image of Voldemort perching on Potter's chest of drawers and having a pee into the Boy Who Lived's boxer shorts.

While he was occupied with that, Hermione came flying down from the stands.

'Is he all right?' she demanded.

'Oh, y-' began Harry.

'He looks all right,' Hermione said. 'Oh, diddums, did you get hurt? Speak to your Aunty Hermione. I was so scared when you fell.'

'Are you talking to me, woman?' Draco inquired, scandalised.

'Are you talking to the *rat*, Hermione?' Potter demanded, equally scandalised.

Hermione flushed. 'He's the sweetest thing,' she said defensively.

'I am not,' Draco replied grumpily. 'I just have amazing sexual allure. Or, well, in my current state - animal magnetism.'

'I'll take him,' Hermione proposed. 'Parvati and Lavender adore him anyway. I'd love to have him. He'll like catching up on his soaps.'

'No, no,' Potter the prat said. 'Ron told me to look after him and I will.'

Hermione looked crestfallen. 'But, Harry... I don't think Fluffy likes you.'

'You are a woman of great perception and intelligence,' Draco informed her. 'Your keen wit drives me to frenzied heights of admiration. Now hit this idiot with a Bludger, hide him behind the Hufflepuff stands and make off with me to your tower.'

'Oh for heaven's sake,' Harry exclaimed. 'Has everyone but me gone mad? It's not like this rat is a person!'

With that, he stormed off.

Draco was carried away, protesting violently.

Oh, would the indignities never end?

*

As Potter entered the Gryffindor common room, that Gina Weasley girl lifted her head. Nothing new there, of course, the Weasleys' youngest hope was like a shark. She could detect a trace of Potter at fifty paces.

'Hi Harry!' she said brightly, bobbing up and down in his path.

'Hi Ginny,' responded Potter, with the boyish I'm-such-a-good-guy-join-my- fan-club smile Draco loathed.

Hang on a second, Gina's name was Ginny? Bugger it. Next someone'd be telling him that the Weasley twins weren't called Fred and Greg.

'How's Ron?' she asked in a whisper.

'Oh, like you care,' said Draco. 'You just want to snuggle up and whisper with Potter. And you're not doing it right. You're attractive enough, if the guy's into redheads, but everybody likes a challenge. Talk about Seamus Finnigan.'

Ginny put her head to one side, as if she was considering something.

'Ron will be fine,' said Harry, with his equally detestable I'm-so-decent-are-you-in-distress-damsel? smile.

Ginny Weasley gave him an innocent and charming smile.

'I'm so glad Ron has a friend like you, Harry. You're so... reliable.' The dismissive

tone of her voice was clear. 'Say, have you seen Seamus? Now, he played a *great* game. A Chaser's such a *dynamic* thing to be, don't you think?'

She flitted away. Draco looked after her with approval.

Bright girl. Good instincts. Pity they were all so clueless up here in Gryffindor, they had a lot of potential. It had to be the height of the tower, he reflected. High altitude - a high standard of morals.

Morals got in the way of successful sexual expeditions. Still, Draco was amazed that *all* the Gryffindors were this innocent. Blaise Zabini had been cutting a swathe through the school, boys round the clock and girls during that week around full moon.

Potter was gaping after the Ginny girl.

'Don't worry, Potter,' Draco said. 'I think Finnigan's seeing Lavender Brown. And if he's not, whoops, too bad... Heh heh heh.'

Ooooh, this might be fun.

*

'I always knew you'd be insufferably boring,' Draco informed Potter. 'Sitting and brooding beside the window for five whole hours, why, you must be a smash hit at parties. You madly dull bastard.'

Potter was sitting beside the window with a big book in his lap. He had not opened it, he was just staring into the spectacularly uninteresting greyness.

Draco was investigating Potter's stuff.

He had already done a stint hiding under the Invisibility Cloak, running around with it flying behind him, shrieking, 'I am SuperDraco!' He had disarranged Potter's socks and looked at the few pictures on Potter's desk.

'Mother was a redhead, eh? Ginny Weasley's in luck if you have an Oedipus complex,' he had prattled idly to himself. 'That's a nice picture of Hermione. Bloody awful one of Ron, his eyes match his hair. Why on earth do you have a picture of a dog, it looks like a Grim, I'd have nightmares. Not that you probably don't have nightmares anyway, all that frightening stuff happening to you - You Know Who after you, Death Eaters cursing your name, Millicent Bulstrode having the hots for you...'

Now Draco was gingerly investigating under Potter's bed. The boy was a secret slob - wrinkled bits of parchment, screwed-up copies of that most hilariously excellent paper, the Daily Prophet, odd socks and fluff galore lurked there. There was also a picture lying in the fluff, in a cheap frame. Draco wondered if it was a secret love.

He went and took a peek, screamed on a very high note and hit Potter's lap at a run.

'Agh oh my God it's horrible horrible I tell you! Some pink, bloated, dreadful THING,

staring at me with awful piggy eyes, yes, it was like a pig in a wig FROM HELL, it wasn't human surely it wasn't human it's too disgusting I feel sick!

Potter petted him (oh the shame!), seeming slightly amused.

'There there Fluffy. Did the picture of Dudley frighten you?'

'What's a Dudley?' Draco asked suspiciously. 'Potter, that *isn't* a secret lover, is it? Because if it is, and this is the last time I will EVER say this to you, you could do better! *Hagrid* could do better!'

'I bet all of your relatives look handsomer than that,' Harry continued absently.

'That's a relative?' Draco choked. 'Oh, Potter, I'm so magically magnifying that and hanging it over the Gryffindor table.'

Mind you, Potter was right. All of Draco's relatives were a lot handsomer than that. Narcissa Malfoy, of course, as your token trophy wife, was gorgeous and it ran in her family. His father was good-looking in a cold bastard way - and you *knew* it ran in his family.

Even Uncle Ethelfride had been handsome, apart from the manic look in his eyes and aside from the purple clown pants.

'I have better looking relatives, though,' Harry continued, and opened his book.

Inside were more pictures of his dead parents. Blah, blah, blah. Quit brooding about it, Potter, what are you, Mr Billowing Robe o'Pain tm?

Draco, supremely uninterested, was about to scurry off and continue his quest for Potter's secret steroids stash when something wet plopped onto his fur.

Draco stared.

Harry Potter was crying.

Oh, no. Look, whoever was in charge of the world, they were getting it wrong. Harry Potter wasn't supposed to cry, he was supposed to smile that trademark well-flossed and heroic and nauseating smile, or at least frown that I-must-battle-the-forces-of-evil-and-Malfoy-that-means-you frown. He wasn't supposed to actually feel for his parents, he was supposed to secretly glory in his own celebrity and smugly wallow in everyone's adulation. He was supposed to love this.

He was still crying.

And Draco, to his horror, felt some kind of... disgusting... sick-making... *squishy* and distinctly *unnatural* feeling stir inside him.

It was almost as if... oh God no... he felt *sorry* for Potter.

Whoever was in charge of the world, he was clearly taking the day off.

Potter had to stop crying. Then, he'd stop feeling sorry for him, and the world could get back to being less like a bad trip.

'Come on now, it's not that bad,' Draco said briskly. 'Chin up. Buck up. Shut up.'

Potter did not seem noticeably comforted, and Draco, not quite believing he was doing this, rubbed his head against Potter's sleeve.

'Think cheery thoughts,' he offered. 'You're rich and famous. You're a total teachers' pet. Ahhh... A nubile redhead wants to shag you?'

Potter sniffed, and petted Draco.

'Thought that'd do the trick.'

'Oh, hey,' said Harry. 'You're actually kind of nice, aren't you?'

'No! And don't think you're getting around me that way.'

Harry stood up. 'Let's go and get you some coffee.'

Oh damn it, now Potter knew his secret weakness. How was he supposed to resist?

'You sneaky *bastard*!'

God, was he supposed to like Potter now? Feck it, next he was going to be filled with admiring respect for Longbottom.

Still, while the going was caffeinated...

'Triple espresso, please.'

*

Ron got out of the infirmary quite soon this time, and he was delighted to discover Harry's new attitude to his pet.

'I guess he feels bad about Cho,' he whispered to Draco.

'Don't be absurd, Weasley,' Draco said grumpily. 'He simply fell prey to my irresistible charms. It was bound to happen. It had nothing to do with you or your girlfriend.'

Ron and Cho kept eyeing each other from a distance. It was all quite painfully absurd. Draco had gotten quite a bit more action in his time without a quarter of the bother.

But if you were silly enough to go around getting emotionally attached to women, that was the kind of thing you had to put up with. Draco had decided at age three not to get

over-fond of anyone, and it had served him well.

Draco's broomstick of thought was blown off the Quidditch course by the sight of Hermione and Harry, racing towards him.

The jolt of pleasure he felt surprised him.

Then Hermione's progress was halted by a small boy barrelling into her and knocking all the breath out of her.

Actually, Draco recognised him. It was Edmund Baddock, wasn't it, Malcolm's little brother.

He was in first year, and he was currently looking mutinous and generally unpleasant as Hermione gasped,

'Do you mind apologising?'

His black eyes narrowed.

'Do you mind watching where you're going - Mudblood?'

Uh-oh, Draco thought. Hermione had once slapped him. Edmund Baddock was small enough for her to kick around like a Muggle ball. She had a wicked temper on her sometimes. Who knew what she was going to do?

She burst into tears.

*

Ron and Harry had taken charge of the situation, seized Hermione's elbows and marched her up to the Gryffindor common room. Then they had sat her down, fetched her hankies and tea, put Draco in her lap and were looking at her appealingly.

'I'll kill him if you like,' Ron offered desperately.

'Someone do something,' Draco urged. 'She's leaking again... and urch, I'm getting all soggy.'

'Why are you even upset?' Harry burst out. 'He's nothing, he doesn't count, he's just a stinking Slytherin...'

Hermione actually sobbed.

'Stop it!' she shouted. 'You can't say that!'

Harry, Ron and Draco sat stunned and silent.

'Oh God,' said Hermione. 'It's just that... It's just that, don't you see, there it is. There's the cycle of hatred. It ends in things like the Ku Klux Klan-'

'The what?' chorused Draco and Ron.

'And Voldemort,' she continued. 'And it starts here, with people like us, in a school. Among contemporaries. Children spout what adults tell them, they say 'Mudblood' or 'stinking Slytherin' and then they hate each other, and then they grow up and *kill* each other, and nobody ever *thinks*!'

Ron waved a hanky, in the same way as a mother might wave a spoon loaded with food in front of a baby and go, 'Here comes the choo-choo!'

'That kid won't listen to me,' Hermione said. 'And I bet his yearmates hate him, and hit him, and he hates and hits them back, just like we always hated Malfoy and his crowd, just like all Gryffindors do.'

'Steady on now,' Draco protested. 'Half the Gryffindors seem to be lusting after me, remember? I doubt they want me chained up and punished - unless they're more kinky than I ever gave them credit for.'

'But Malfoy's Bubotuber pus,' Ron objected.

'Oh, thank you very much.'

'You see?' said Hermione. 'We all hate each other, and that's where it leads to. You start out with ignorant kids spouting what they've been taught and we never show them they're wrong, and we all hate each other, and it ends in blood. Harry, you told me Hagrid said Slytherins were worse than the other houses, you heard him say that all the Malfoys were rotten.'

'You know, he's been biased since that tiny incident with Uncle Ethelfride and his dog. Oh, and since my father had him thrown in Azkaban.'

Hermione just looked pale and rather sick now.

'We never corrected him, did we? We got angry about other people's prejudices, we never worried about our own, and... we're all almost as bad as each other.'

'We never started with Malfoy the way he started with us!' Harry exclaimed.

'We never stopped either!' Hermione yelled. 'And no, I don't like any of the Slytherins, I think they're ignorant gits, but how are we supposed to let this continue? Isn't there someone, anyone, we could have proved to that... that...'

Her head was in her hands now.

'That I don't believe all of them are supposed to be evil,' she whispered. 'Then maybe there are some of them who would have rethought the belief that Muggleborn are scum. Oh, isn't there some way to challenge all this endless hatred?'

There were so few people who would have cried over this, Draco thought. But

Hermione was smart, and Hermione saw things that other people did not and tried to make things right, and... made some very good points.

'We don't even see each other as people anymore,' she said in a low voice. 'Is there a single Slytherin in Hogwarts who would care if they saw me crying?'

'I care,' said Draco.

Oh, bugger me!

He was in even more trouble than he had thought.

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## **Chapter 6**

### **Boy Love's First Kiss**

Ron was in the infirmary so long this time that Harry took Draco to come visit him.

"How are you doing, boy?" Ron asked, tickling him behind the ears.

To think he'd see the day when he wouldn't mind this.

"Oh, you know," Draco said. "This one here needs looking after, he's always breaking his glasses and forgetting to brush his hair, and he hasn't got a TV. On the whole we're doing all right, but it'll be a relief when you get back to look after him."

"I'm taking great care of him," Harry promised.

"If you care, caffeinate," Draco muttered with a certain amount of bitterness.

"And... listen," Harry added awkwardly. "I was thinking... about Cho."

"And I came to the conclusion, who needs her? Let me ravish you on the bed, my gorgeous redhaired raunch puppet."

It was just too much fun to see their little faces when they thought they were actually thinking these things.

Yes, he knew it, he was evil.

"I was mad," Harry confessed. "But Cho isn't required to like me, and I'd like her to be happy. I'd like you to be happy. And when I saw you lying there on the ground, it just... made it all clear. If that's what makes you happy, Ron, then go for it. I - I wouldn't ever want to stand in your way. We're best friends, aren't we? That's not going to change."

"Yeah, yeah, cue the manly, Quidditch-victory-hug of straight guys."

Draco wondered if Gryffindors really had their own evil thoughts, or if this cynical inner Slytherin thing was really freaking them out.

"Harry..." Ron was blushing, apparently because having a discussion about a girl with his best friend of six years was too embarrassing.

From the purity of the Gryffindors, the idiocy of the Hufflepuffs and the general know-it-all attitude of the Ravenclaws, good Lord deliver us.

Famous Slytherin prayer.

"Harry, I'd never want to hurt you..."

Harry touched Ron's shoulder. "I know that, Ron. That's exactly why. That's exactly why."

Cho entered, carrying flowers.

She went red as her poinsettias when she saw Harry. Harry, however, gave her a smile.

Bugger it, Draco thought. The propaganda was true. The bastard really is brave, noble and good. What are the odds?

"We were just done," Harry said gently. "It's nice to see you, Cho... though I'm sure it's even better for Ron."

He managed to almost sound roguish. Cho looked immensely relieved... and a little shy.

Ron looked eager.

"We'll just go..." Harry continued, picking up Draco and backing off.

"Put me down, you twat! You haven't seen him with girls, he needs me!"

Harry had chosen this time to stop listening. Damn Gryffindors.

Draco saw Cho bending over Ron as they went out.

"Oh, never mind. Chang has him right where she wants him - helpless in a bed. It's a good thing you didn't hook up with her, Potter... she seems a demanding creature. Ron'll be fine... big hands, you know..."

Harry shook his head to clear out the disturbing thoughts as he strode down the corridor.

Draco was somewhat touched to see tears welling up in his eyes.

Not to say that if he hadn't been somewhat rodented, Harry would not have received the Mother of All Mockfests.

"No," Draco proceeded smoothly. "What I have in mind for you is something undemanding, you know, something young, adoring and... redheaded."

Honestly, how had the Gryffindors managed their love lives without him?

Oh wait, these were Gryffindors, they didn't have...

And there were Ginny and Hermione now, both looking very pretty if Draco did say it himself. They were giggling together in an innocent way which Draco didn't really see much of down in the dungeons.

It was okay - for a change.

"Hey there, girls," Harry said. "If you're off to visit Ron, give him five minutes."

"Potter, that's insulting!" Draco exclaimed. "Give him at least ten."

"Cho's in there," Harry explained.

Hermione instantly looked concerned. She was too nice for her own good, if you asked Draco.

"Oh, Harry, how are you?"

"Fine, actually. Surprisingly okay. Meaningful look at Ginny."

"Fine, actually. Surprisingly okay," Harry repeated after Draco, giving Ginny a menacing look.

Then he tried to look at his own mouth in astonishment.

"Oh, I'm good, baby!" Draco said gleefully.

"Oh, I'm..."

Mercifully, Harry stopped himself.

Ginny was looking incredulous and delighted. Hermione looked as if she wondered whether she should sidle away.

Harry unwittingly got a complete revenge when in a flustered attempt to be playful and defuse the situation, he dropped Draco down Hermione's robes.

"AGGH!!!!"

"AGGH!!!! Potter, you bastard, I'm going to kill you!"

Oh, Draco was blind. He couldn't find his way out. Hang on, was this a sleeve... no, it was more like a strap... dammit, what was this slope he had fallen down...? Whoa, whoa, what was this?

Oh.

OH.

"Or maybe I owe you one."

Oh, hang on, no, he was a Malfoy and this kind of cheap copping a feel was...

Yes, very much in character, but...

Hermione had no idea, and taking advantage of unknowing females was...

All right, a very common Slytherin practise, but...

Oh, obviously these bloody Gryffindors were infectious or something.

"Potter? I'm in her left cup. Come get me."

Draco realised the consequences of this when Harry tried to obey, and Hermione gave an outraged shriek.

Draco couldn't help sniggering.

"Harry!" exclaimed Ginny and Hermione in chorus.

"I, ah, uh..."

Draco didn't at all like this idiotic tone in Harry's voice. If he was getting over Cho by turning towards Hermione...

Well, it was just wrong, that was all. He was far too... short for her. It was ridiculous.

Draco didn't make the rules.

"Hands right off, Potter. Weasley, a hand in the war effort here..."

Draco was finally extricated. Hermione and Harry were both scarlet.

"I have to go, uh, fetch a book..." Hermione said hastily, and decamped.

"Should we wait for her?" wondered Harry.

"No, no. She likes books. Can't get enough of them. You'd probably ruin a special moment," Draco told him hastily.

He was getting this Ginny and Harry thing settled.

Draco Malfoy, village matchmaker.

Oh well, you had to do something to while away the weary hours between getting put down girls' tops.

"Now that incident of the Boy Who Had Busy Hands is over," Draco proceeded.

"Now that incident of the Boy Who Had Busy Hands is over," Ginny repeated, and smiled cheekily.

Draco was somewhat surprised.

He was also somewhat impressed. You never knew with redheads, did you.

"I actually have to get a cloak from my room," Ginny finished.

"Oh, I'll walk you," Harry offered instantly.

He hadn't offered to walk Hermione. Veeery iiiinteresting.

Draco's Veela-inherited Barometer o'Sexual Attraction was going off like anything.

And possibly, if left to themselves, Harry and Ginny would have got around to business after several more years of friendship, stammering, a never-spoken-of-afterwards mistletoe event, falling over each others' feet, having an incredibly awkward proposal and the obligatory white wedding.

Draco simply intended to speed things up a bit.

Slytherin style.

\*

"So, are you crushed about Cho?"

"Thank you, you scintillatingly outspoken snippet of cuteness," Draco said gratefully. "You're making my job soooo much easier. One might think you were unGryffindorlike enough to have hormones."

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Everyone Frankly Wondered About, wrinkled his nose in a bashful manner and looked at the ground.

"You know... I meant it when I said I was okay," he said tentatively.

"Oh, that's it?" Draco screeched. "That's all you're giving me to work with? You gutless ra - weas - bloody forget it!"

Ginny's mind seemed to be working along the same lines from her expression.

Draco thought furiously.

"All right, here's an idea. Maybe it was just an infatuation. Say it! Say it!"

"Maybe..." Harry waited for an excruciating moment.

Oooh, he was so The Boy Who May Actually Have Been Born Asexual.

"Maybe it was just an infatuation," Harry concluded.

Yes! Yes! Harry Potter, you're beautiful!

Heavens, he \*had\* to get away from these Gryffindors, or he could not be held

responsible for any fan clubs he might join.

No. Draco swore that if it ever came down to that, he would take the path of noble suicide.

"Try this," he suggested. "I was looking for love... but I'm starting to think that I was looking in the wrong place."

Draco knew it was unbearably corny, but chicks liked this crap.

Besides, Harry Heroic Potter could hardly bend Ginny backwards in his arms and say through the corner of his mouth, 'What I want I take - on the floor if necessary, you shaggable little piece.'

Draco sniffed. Only he got away with that kind of thing.

"I was looking for love, but I'm starting to think that I was looking in the wrong place."

A dawning light was breaking over Harry's face as he said this, as if he was...

Starting to believe it.

Honestly, there was no call for sincerity! Draco was trying to seduce someone at second hand, there was no need to add further complications!

How like Harry, to begin buying into this.

Ginny looked like she was buying it too. Well, that was a comfort.

"Oh, Harry," she said.

"Yes, Ginny?" said the Boy Who Might Be Straight After All, leaning in.

Oh, thank you, thought Draco. Finally.

"We're at the girls' dormitory," replied Ginny, ducking inside.

Evil, evil redhead!

Draco was most seriously impressed. He was starting to wonder if this girl was too good for Harry.

Of course, the other option was Hermione.

"In there, man!" Draco commanded. "Finish this! Are you a man or a m - okay, we'll stay off the small furry animals subject. Get your arse in there, or may Finnigan get her after all."

Harry looked conflicted. Clearly, barging into the girls' rooms was Not Gryffindor



Behaviour.

Draco quite liked the Slytherin girls' dorms. The Ravenclaws weren't bad either.

"She might be taking her clothes off," he suggested.

Harry took two smart steps backwards.

Maybe Draco had been a bit too quick, assuming the boy was into women after all.

Honestly, if the Sorting Hat had been misbegotten enough to put Draco into Gryffindor he would have screamed and pelted out of the place.

Not scoring for six years... This chivalry had to stop.

There was a crash and a bang from inside.

Thank Salazar, Draco thought fervently as Harry dashed inside.

Ginny Weasley stood, looking somewhat abashed, beside her dresser. Half the contents were on the floor.

Obviously, Ron did not hold a monopoly on the Weasley clumsiness. Falling over tree roots and dumping inoffensive dresser contents everywhere...

No time to muse on the Weasleys' unfortunate genes! Seductionarama!

"I, I thought you might be in trouble," Harry stammered.

Ginny softened visibly. "And you came in to rescue me."

"If you were in any trouble..." Harry said, his voice trailing off into decided weakness as Ginny drew closer... "I'd - I'd come to rescue you..."

"Really?" Ginny whispered.

"Come on," Draco said. "Do I have to wave a flag here? The girl is gagging for it! Kiss her! Give me a K, give me an I..."

Later, Draco always suspected it was Ginny who made the first move.

Not that Harry didn't seem to be enjoying himself.

"Give me a 'now we're getting somewhere!' Good children!" Draco said approvingly. "Excellent. Couldn't have done it - no, I tell a lie, could have done it a whole lot better myself, but the girl seems happy enough."

Harry drew back slightly.

"What I was looking for..." he whispered, "may have been a lot closer than I'd

thought..."

I didn't help at all with that particular nauseating sentence, Draco thought. He did it all himself.

He may be a natural.

Thankfully, Ginny shut him up quick.

After a few moments Draco became a little uneasy.

"Well... well, I think that will be splendid for the time being, don't you?"

Neither Harry nor Ginny paid him any attention.

"You have classes you know!" Draco yelled. "Education is vital! Knowledge is power!"

Nobody was moving, and Harry's glasses seemed to be steaming up quick.

"Oh, get a room." Draco quieted. "Hang on, this is her room. Oh, God."

At that precise moment, Hermione burst in.

"Did I hear a - Oh! Ohmigosh! I'm so sorry!"

Draco wondered why on earth anyone had ever made a fuss about her hair. It was great hair! Gorgeous hair! It made her look like a brunette sunburst as she entered a room!

All right, that was probably the hysterical relief talking there.

\*

The practically simultaenous hook-up of Ron and Cho Chang, and Harry and Ginny, was the cue for something more alarming and more sickening than Draco had ever dreamed.

The Gryffindors' Pre-Christmas Fest o'Lurve.

Six years of pent-up hormones, smiling shyly at your crush, being decent and bashful, had obviously taken their toll. It was time for an explosion.

But it was a uniquely Gryffindor explosion. Draco could have handled impassioned snogging.

When people held doors open for their crushes, when they began making Christmas cards that put Ginny's Famous Valentine to shame, when Harry with a furious blush presented Ginny with flowers... ugh, it was just too horrible!

Lavender and Seamus came out of the closet and then quickly went back in.

Quite literally.

Disturbing noises followed.

Ron and Cho, Ginny and Harry, held hands and smiled dreamily, as events snowballed around them. Dean Thomas appeared to be dating either or both of the Patil twins, and seemed a bit confused about the whole affair.

There was even a rumour about Colin Creevey and Blaise Zabini, which Draco thought was just sick.

Neville kept looking over at Hermione. This was the dizzy limit.

Draco didn't know if he could take much more.

Thankfully, Hermione did not seem affected by the raging hormonal tide. She looked at people with a faintly amused and contemptuous air, and read quietly in the Gryffindor common room with Draco on her lap, as around her couples giggled and whispered and snogged.

Draco thought this was a very mature attitude.

"So, uh, Hermione," Neville said, "you like the stars, don't you?"

"No she doesn't. Bugger off."

"They're all right," Hermione replied instead. "Why?"

Draco liked his version better.

"I was thinking... we could, uh, maybe go look at them from the Astronomy Tower?"

Across the room, attention was suddenly turned on them.

"The Astronomy Tower!" Draco howled in outrage. "You...! That den of sin, that nest of nookie, that fortress of Blaise Zabini! She is not that kind of girl!"

Hermione smiled.

Far too kindly.

And didn't kick Longbottom.

In Draco's opinion, a wildly ill-judged move.

"I'm kind of tired, Neville," she answered. "I'm going up to bed. Maybe another time."

"Like when hell freezes over, and all the little demonettes go ice-skating hand in hand,

twirling little figures of eight in cosmic freaking harmony!"

"May I take Fluffy with me, Ron?" Hermione continued.

Ron looked up from his arduous task of composing another letter to Cho.

"Hm? Oh yes, sure, fine."

"You don't pay me enough attention since that Chang girl came along," Draco told him severely. "If you're not careful, I shall leave you and set up house with Hermione. Then you'll be sorry. And you have Potions homework to complete, you know."

Nevertheless, he was quite happy when Hermione took him upstairs. Hermione had a radio and a TV.

She turned on the radio and climbed into bed, Draco settling on the pillow. Her hair, whatever else might be said about it, did smell nice, and was extremely soft.

Hermione, who did not seem at all sleepy, began to pet Draco. Her face was pensive.

"It's not that I'm jealous," she said. "I'm happy for them all. I really am."

The radio kept playing.

'I put on my PJs and I hop into bed...'

"I'd just... like to be happy too," Hermione murmured. "I know what they all say. Hermione Granger, more into books than boys."

"Books can be fun too," Draco put in enthusiastically. "There's this certain sections of the Restricted Section, and well... actually I forget. It was a dream. And it wasn't my dream, it was Blaise Zabini's. And let's get off this subject, shall we?"

"And I love books, but - I'm a human being. Viktor was sweet-"

"If you like a man who walks like a DUCK! He was more bird than man."

"But I wasn't all that interested. And Ron, well, I love Ron, I do, but he gets so insecure and he can be so jealous, and he hated it that I still owed Viktor. I couldn't put up with that."

"Nobody could," soothed Draco. "Wait, what? You still owl the duck man? Are you insane, woman?"

'I'm half alive, but I feel mostly dead...'

"And I like Neville, but honestly... I know I'm not pretty, but... Isn't there anyone at all? I'd just like - to have somebody."

'... turn out the light, I shouldn't think any more tonight...'

Draco looked at Hermione as she laid her cheek against the pillow. Saw her sweet, heart-shaped, sad and rather lonely face, the warm light of her closing brown eyes. Even a little miserable, she was a good person and looked it, intelligent, a bit too innocent.

She had argued over Arithmancy, started that house elf society when nobody else cared, narrowed her eyes and actually hit him over some stupid animal, cried because of Edmund bloody Baddock and she had soft hands.

And... there was just something...

Oh, godly God.

'I know you love me, and soon I know you will see...'

"You have me," Draco said in a low voice. "If - if you'd like."

Hermione smiled slightly in the dim light.

"I guess it's just you and me, huh, Fluffy?"

She dozed off, her breathing regular and oh, somehow comforting, in the darkness of this room.

"It certainly seems that way," Draco said at last, in shell-shocked tones, staring emptily into the night.

'You were meant for me, and I was meant for you...'

\*

Unluckily, the Gryffindor Gag-Me-With-A-Spoon Snogfest had further-reaching and more terrible consequences than everyone staying over Christmas to be with their honeys and go with them to the Yule Ball, which had been held every year since the Triwizard Tournament because Dumbledore lived to torment his students.

That was Draco's take on the situation, anyway.

Ron started to think that Draco looked lonely. So he fixed him up with Hannah Abbot's rat!

A Hufflepuff rat. Oh, the humanity!

A nasty, brown, common, rodent rat.

Who badly wanted a piece of Fluffy's action.

Draco could not blame her, but at the same time it was just not on.

Malfoys were fastidious creatures. If the rat wanted one, she was going to have to wait for her Prince Ethelfride.

Yeccccccch.

Draco would not soon forget scooting madly across the floor, the other rat in hot pursuit, screaming "Help me, Weasley, you stupid idiot!" as he tried to leap onto Longbottom's bed in a desperate bid for freedom.

Ron's interference was the only thing that stopped Draco from saying "Goodbye, cruel world!" and throwing himself from the Gryffindor Tower.

One spark of light had come from the whole sorry business, of course. Longbottom had been charmed by Hannah and was even now in the process of writing her a love note.

A Longbottom and a Hufflepuff.

Somebody, please, think of the children!

Draco stretched luxuriantly in Hermione's lap, reflecting that this was not his problem. She was sitting by the fire, a cup of coffee within easy reach which she had surrendered to him. Occasionally Harry reached over and tickled him behind the ears.

Ron sat, buried in his Potions homework, which he was actually getting through rather fast because Draco kept peering over his shoulder and whispering the answers to him.

"I'm getting it! I'm really getting it!" he said jubilantly at intervals.

You had to feel a bit sorry for the boy.

Draco felt more sorry for himself when he discovered he was running low on coffee, but a quick word from him to the extremely suggestible Longbottom fixed that.

"Ahahahaha. You are all my unwitting slaves," he cackled as he sipped from his fresh cup.

Harry smiled slightly, for no reason, as he toasted bread over the fire. Hermione smiled as she read.

It was all so warm, and - and revolting of course, but really so... cosy.

The Slytherin common room wasn't like this.

Draco yawned. Ron jumped up.

"Fluffy's exhausted and so am I. We're off to bed."

"Can't wait to get me alone, Weasley," Draco said grumpily.

"Awww, Ron, I want him," Hermione protested.

"You always have him!" Harry said. "I'm the one who looked after him while Ron was ill. He likes me too you know."

"Come on, three-way bitch fight," Draco urged brightly. "It'll make me feel so special."

"Excuse me? This is my rat," Ron said, and left the room bearing Draco in triumph, to calls of "Sharing is caring!"

Draco yawned again. They weren't... bad kids, any of them.

In fact, he - rather liked them all.

Even this great redhaired lunk, who was cuddling him quite insistently as he tucked him up in bed.

Draco didn't even bother struggling. He was still warm from the fire, and kind of drowsy... it didn't even disturb him when the other boys came in and got into bed.

He felt - peaceful. Peaceful as a child, caressed by a parent.

Not that his parents had been the affectionate type. They weren't touchy-feely. And Draco had never minded, but...

This wasn't... dreadful.

He was almost... happy.

"You know, Fluffy," Ron murmured sleepily, "things have been so wonderful since I found you. It's like - you're lucky. My lucky, magic rat... It's - great."

"You're making me blush," Draco said drily. "Well. Under the fur."

"Night night," Ron whispered, and kissed the top of his head.

Draco was about to remark on how that wasn't hygienic, and Hermione wouldn't approve, and he personally didn't swing that way, but...

Then he felt a sudden, intense pain radiate from the base of his spine to the ends of his fur, tingling madly and horribly as it raced through his body. He doubled up in agony, for just a spasm, a moment, and he clenched his fists and...

Clenched his fists?

Since when did he have...

He saw Ron's eyes gleam with horror in the darkness. They looked an awful lot

smaller than they had of late.

Oh, no. Oh, bugger.

At the same time, both boys realised the same terrible truth.

Draco Malfoy was naked in Ron Weasley's bed.

Both boys screamed.

Every light in the dormitory went on.

~~~~~

Chapter Seven

Humiliatus Totalus

For one mad moment, chaos reigned supreme in the Gryffindor dorms.

Shrieks came from all sides.

"It's Malfoy!" wailed Neville Longbottom, diving under the bed.

"Ron, say it isn't so!" Seamus Finnigan exclaimed, his expression indicating imminent hysterics.

"Oh God," Dean Thomas kept repeating fervently. "Oh God... Oh God."

Harry seemed to be transfixed with horror. "Give me your bed sheet!" Draco demanded determinedly. "Right now!"

Ron just sat and stared.

"Fluffy?" he said at last. "*Fluffy*?"

Seamus was shaking by now.

"Please, *please* don't let that be a pet name..."

"Oh God," Dean said with even deeper fervour.

"Keep it up, Thomas, I'm sure he'll pay attention one day." Draco wrenched the bed sheets off Ron's bed, and finally got his shame covered. Not before time, either. These Gryffindors were ones for the unseemly staring.

Made a chap feel quite naked.

"Malfoy?" Harry said at last.

Draco glanced over and saw how pale he was.

"Don't swoon, Potter. I'm not here to ravish you."

"Who are you here to ravish?!" Seamus' voice had become shrill by now.

"Oh God," said Dean.

Everyone was still staring at Draco. He began to tie the sheet around his waist.

Must think. Must plot.

Item One: Human again. That's good. That's definitely good.

Item Two: In Gryffindor tower. Bad, bad, bad. Even worse.

Item Three: Was naked in Weasley's bed. Can wash, and wash, yet will never be clean. Or out of the tabloids.

Item Four: Clothing. Must somehow acquire... clothing.

"What have you done!" roared Ron, catching Draco off guard and around the middle.

Startled, Draco went down with a crash. Ron fell on him and began to swing.

"They're wrestling," Seamus chanted in the tones of one beyond trauma. "They're playing rough little games, they're-"

"Seamus!" Harry snapped. "You're not helping."

Seamus appeared to be beyond hearing as well. "I think he's straddling him."

"Oh God," said Dean, the broken record with the broken mind.

"Get off me!" Draco snarled, more and more aware that this sheet was not secure. "This is all your fault, Weasley. If you hadn't *kissed* me..."

Item Five: Did I just *say* that?

Item Six: I did. To quote Thomas - oh God.

"Oh please," Seamus gasped. "No details. I beg you."

"Seamus!" Ron spluttered. "You can't think I'm - you can't possibly imagine- "

"Now I'm sure there are plenty of innocent explanations for you to be... in bed with a naked Malfoy," Harry said weakly. "I - I, this could be some form of mass hallucination. Or! We could all be on drugs."

"Be on anything you like but me," Draco snapped. "Off!"

The mental picture that ensued apparently made Seamus fall off the bed.

"Plenty of innocent explanations," Harry murmured feebly. "Oh, if only I could think of one..."

Seamus, now on the floor, was rocking back and forth.

"Malfoy's wearing a sheet and Ron won't get off him and Ron's starting to get all sweaty and look crazed with animal lust..."

"Jesus, Finnigan, you need to get out more," Draco said. "And you need to get OFF me, Weasley. Or I'm telling Chang about this."

Ron looked blank.

"How did you know?"

Almost absentmindedly, but to Draco's enormous relief, he scrambled up.

Draco got up, smoothing his sheet and bestowing his traditional Slytherin sneer upon them all. He was aware that the lofty, contemptuous air came off better when he was clothed. It was just one of those things.

"Malfoy!" Harry said, striking the Hero Note of Righteous Indignation at last. "I demand to know what you did to Ron!"

"Don't be graphic," implored Seamus.

"I didn't do *anything* to Ron!" Draco returned sharply.

There was a gurgle of "First names, too," from Seamus.

"Listen, it's all quite simple. We were in bed - no, wait - then there was the kiss - hang on, but that came after the - my clothes were in the bathroom - but that's not important and - I haven't had them on for ages, anyway..."

"Oh God."

"Shut up, Thomas. And then he tackled me to the floor, but hang on... I didn't mean - I've left out the rat part..."

"Animals too! Ron, how could you!" Seamus cried.

"No, no, but *look*, it's all right. It's not like I haven't been in Ron's bed before - I mean, I've been in it for months... when I wasn't in Harry or Hermione's and... sweet Lord, will no-one stop me?"

For the first time in his life, Draco Malfoy found himself entirely tongue-tied.

He looked around at the white, shocked and nauseated faces.

"So," he ended brightly, "I hope that's all cleared up. Now, let us never speak of this again."

"Malfoy, you are a crazed, lying, evil naked person," Harry said with deep conviction.

"I need a shower," Ron exclaimed suddenly.

"*You* need a shower," Draco remarked. "Try being washed by tongue alone for months."

"Oh... eeeerk..."

Seamus' horror had apparently reached the point of no vocalization.

"And what's up with your hair?" inquired Neville, who was under the bed and did not seem up to speed with the entire situation.

Draco became aware of a terrible covered, floppy sensation around his neck.

His hair was unbrushed! Ungelled! Unkempt!

In front of Gryffindors!

He had had enough. Being naked was one thing. Being badly groomed was quite another.

"I am going home," he announced.

"Oh, thank God," said Dean, slightly varying his formula.

"Oh, no you don't," Ron exclaimed.

Seamus gave a moan of terror.

"I mean, look, hang on, you were in my bed!" Ron shouted. "I mean - rat theft! Sexual harassment! Indignity!"

"In your dreams," Draco snapped.

"Malfoy," Harry said firmly, "I think you owe us an explanation."

He stood up. Draco could have told him that looking valiant in small pyjamas was a losing proposition, but in view of his sheet situation decided to keep quiet.

"And I'll give you everything you deserve," he replied smoothly. "Tomorrow."

He shouldn't have done it. But hell, he was a Malfoy, he couldn't help it.

He blamed his ancestors.

He waved coquettishly to Ron.

"Be seeing you, lover."

He cracked a smile as he left the Gryffindor dormitory on the gasp that burst from all throats. The smile carried on as he heard Longbottom's apprehensive question, "Is he gone?"

The smile only faded when he realised that he should have begged or stolen some robes.

Oh God, he was wearing a *sheet*.

Oh God, please, please. He *couldn't* bump into anyone.

He must look like such a complete, utter prat.

*

Hermione had picked up the book she'd left in the common room when she looked up at the stairs and saw him.

He looked like a sword of moonlight made human standing on the nighttime steps, hair the impossible colour of childhood innocence grown too long, locks straying at the nape of his neck and cheeks. A soft shock fell into his eyes, which glittered with the dazzling elusiveness of silver light upon water. The moonlight had been crafted by a Renaissance sculptor, each plane of his face severely angled and starkly perfect. His cheekbones and jawline were smooth as the slashes of a knife. His nose, chin, forehead, were shaped by centuries of aristocrats to slope into the same elegant curves as an ornament they commissioned would have been expected to.

His skin was the same colour as marble, which was oddly fitting for the sharply defined lines that made his throat and chest and arms. It was a beauty that seemed designed, like a Greek statue, a celebration of strength in a form that looked fragile as the stem of an expensive wineglass. The crafted hollow at the base of his long throat, the sleek fan of his collarbone and the rounded rise of his shoulders looked far too carefully created to be anything but impossibly delicate.

White material curved from snake-hips. This attire seemed absolutely natural for this frail moment of beauty, quivering pale and lovely as a candle flame.

Then she squinted against the moonlight and assembled the pieces of that face for recognition instead of aesthetic admiration, and realised it was Draco Malfoy.

Bloody hell!

She jumped as if she had been stung.

'Malfoy!'

He stepped forward, carrying off the sheet with the arrogant grace of a young emperor.

Hang on, the sheet?

It looked as if Malfoy was trying to smile in a placating fashion, which looked distinctly odd on him.

'Now, Hermione-'

It took Hermione a few minutes of thought to realise that this was her name and thus quite an appropriate thing to call her, so incongruous did it sound on his lips.

'What are you doing coming down from the... boys' room... wearing... one of the Gryffindor sheets? What did you come up in? No, don't answer that... Malfoy, you've been missing for over a month!'

Malfoy shrugged somewhat helplessly.

'Uh. Look, there are reasons for-'

'Drugs?' Hermione demanded. 'Dark charms on Harry? Some kind of - liaison - with Neville Longbottom?'

Malfoy almost jumped out of his sheet.

'Ew! Ew, how unbelievably gross! Listen, I could do a lot better than Longbottom.' He looked grouchy. 'I should hope I'd at least rate a Dean Thomas.'

'Was that a confession?!'

'Ewwwww!' Malfoy began deep breathing to calm himself. 'Absolutely not. Honestly, are you secretly reading porn behind a History of Hogwarts? Because for a so-called dedicated student, you have a dirty mind. First fancying Professor Loveheart, now this..'

Hermione put a hand on her hip.

'That is exactly the kind of disgusting thing I would expect to hear from you, Malfoy.'

'Glad I didn't disappoint.'

'But... wait... How did you know I've read a History of Hogwarts?'

Malfoy looked distinctly shifty, which was a familiar look Hermione was rather grateful for.

'Ummm - hasn't everyone?'

'Well, Malfoy, I didn't know you could read.'

'Hey, my grades aren't all about seducing the professors with my celebrated good looks.' He smirked. 'Who has the time? Anyway, consider Professor Flitwick... who has the inclination?'

Hermione had never noticed if Malfoy did well at school or not. Though, given his enthusiasm for Potions and Arithmancy - besides, it wasn't like she cared.

Another thing popped into her mind like a firecracker, which wanted attention.

'And how did you know I fancied Professor Lockhart? Not that I did,' she added quickly. 'And you still haven't explained your disappearance, or the - sheet-'

'Er - ah - who didn't fancy Professor Lockhart?'

'What with that sentence and the fact you just came from the boys' dormitory, I'm starting to wonder about you-'

Hermione was actually starting to feel quite comfortable. Teasing boys was something she did exceptionally well, and Malfoy was starting to look like Ron when he hadn't done his homework.

When Draco Malfoy suddenly remembered that he was, once again, Draco Malfoy.

'I'd love to stand around here chatting all night, Granger,' he drawled. 'But this sheet is wicked draughty, if you get my meaning. Besides, I shudder to think what Professor McProtectorOfMaidenVirtue would imagine if she came upon us in our questionable clothing. What would that do to my reputation?'

Hermione suddenly became acutely conscious that she was wearing a nightshirt, which was absolutely ridiculous considering he was wearing a sheet.

Please, please don't let me be blushing.

She wished desperately for just a shred of Malfoy's incredible poise, quite unmoved by the fact that he was wearing bedclothes. Malfoy had even been able to stand right up and threaten the madman who had turned him into a ferret and bounced him around a room.

At certain times, you had to admire him - the utter jerk.

'Of course,' Malfoy continued, and his voice became winding as a snake's, 'If it is a choice between that rumour and one about Longbottom...'

The pale-haired Slytherin walked slowly towards her. Hermione stared up at the cool gleam of his eyes as his voice curled rich and warm around her, in a sort of frozen disbelief.

In a moment, he was so close she could have reached out and touched his bare chest.

Obviously, she didn't do anything of the kind.

'What are you on, Malfoy?' she hissed.

His smile was pure Malfoy. 'Nothing now. Give me a minute.'

'Ugh - Malfoy, have I mentioned lately that you're revolting?'

'Is that why you're having such problems breathing?'

Bugger.

'Come now, Hermione...' Malfoy's voice was silky. 'Where's that Gryffindor kindness? You wouldn't let that reckless despoiler of purity Longbottom sully my good name?'

He moved in towards her.

Her chest exploded into spangles of panic. She raised a hand and shoved him away, which of course involved touching his bare skin, which was more physical contact than she had ever wanted to have with Malfoy.

It also awakened all kinds of disturbing thoughts about skin taut over muscle, hands sliding and the possible softness of locks that fell into certain eyes, but Hermione put that down to the stress of the moment.

Malfoy lifted his hands in a gesture of innocence, which was not damn well likely.

'Get *out*!' Hermione snapped.

He shrugged, setting off that upsetting interplay of muscle under skin again.

'As you wish.'

He slid out of the common room. A moment after he had gone, Hermione realised he had not given her an answer about any of the important questions she had asked.

Bugger, bugger, bugger.

*

Well, that had gone incredibly well, Draco thought to himself. Of all the prats in the world... he had been wearing a damnable sheet when she saw him again.

A sheet!

He still couldn't believe it. He supposed he had to be grateful that she had not gone off shrieking with contemptuous laughter. As for whatever had possessed him to make a move on her, all pure and Gryffindorlike in her girlish nightshirt, something he could not possibly touch...

He had tried to distract her from awkward questions, and got carried away.

Please, Draco thought. I can't take any more embarrassing scenes. Let me just get to my nice cozy bed, and I'll deal with everything in the morning.

'Blaise Zabini Is A Tart,' he whispered, and the door swung open.

Malcolm Baddock let out an ungodly howl.

Draco cursed Murphy, and every Slytherin in Hogwarts, including Professor Snape in fluffy slippers that brightened Draco's day somewhat, showed up at the entrance in double quick time.

And stared. And stared.

Some of the girls were staring in a way that made Draco quite uncomfortable.

Blaise Zabini was eyeing the tie of his sheet in a way that made him feel distinctly panicky.

Pansy Parkinson flung herself at him in a way that made him feel really victimised.

'Oh, Draco!' she cried. 'God, we were all so worried!'

'Er... that's nice... Watch the sheet...'

Everyone obeyed him and watched with interest.

'Where have you been?' demanded Pansy.

'What have you been doing?' asked Goyle.

'What happened to you?' inquired Snape.

'What are you wearing?' Crabbe wanted to know.

'Isn't that a Gryffindor sheet?' Blaise was just a wee bit too observant.

Draco looked around at all the worried, curious, questioning faces hemming him in. He squashed the urge to run.

'I can explain everything,' he promised.

There was an expectant pause.

'In the morning,' he added, and swept off in true Malfoy style, leaving his entire house staring after him.

~~~~~



## Chapter Eight

### Draco Redux

*Dear Father,*

*Professor Dumbledore has instructed me to write to you and inform you of my safety, as doubtless you have been frantic. I understand that vital matters such as Death Eater meetings and cocktail parties kept you too busy to search for me. As your son and a good Malfoy, I would never question your actions in this or any matter.*

*I was under a spell, but am now liberated and in hot pursuit of the culprit. Terrible tortures were inflicted upon me, but I bore them like a Malfoy. If you knew exactly what I have done, I feel you would be truly amazed.*

*Give my regards to the Dark Lord, and also mother.*

*Your son,*

*Draco Malfoy.*

*P.S. Whole school abuzz with the news of my sordid affair with Ron Weasley. Have a nice day.*

Draco sat back and admired his letter. He thought it got his message across beautifully.

Of course, there was always a 'Screw you, Dad!' Howler. But Draco felt that lacked subtlety.

Draco felt it made amends for his morning. He had been shaken out of sleep at six and dragged, kicking and screaming and making innumerable muttered comments about sexual deprivation causing moodiness, to Dumbledore's office.

An extremely put out Professor McGonagall had left them alone after that.

Dumbledore had fixed his eyes on Draco, and asked quietly,

'Have you an explanation for your prolonged absence?'

Draco was silent for a few moments, horribly torn between several alternatives. One side of him was clamouring to tell Dumbledore that he had been kidnapped, tied up and forced to be someone's sex slave. Another part brightly suggested that he should claim to have been attending his Death Eater initiation, and receiving a Dark Mark in an unmentionable place.

Quite a bit of him wanted to claim he had been saving the world Harry Potter style because he felt it was his duty to preserve innocents, and see the old man die of heart failure.

Eventually, he did something which would shame the Malfoy name forevermore.

He told the absolute truth.

"I was a rat," he confessed.

The look on Dumbledore's face was something Draco would treasure for some time.

And the Gryffindors thought this man was infallible... even though he had a positive mania for abandoning his students at times of dire peril and bringing the powers of darkness onto the Hogwarts staff...

Draco explained, at length, in detail, and with various illustrative gestures.

No, he had no idea who had done this to him. No, he had no idea how the Polyjuice Potion had been changed in order to have this effect on him. No, he really couldn't explain the dancing.

Yes, he did insist on employing this offensive tone.

Draco had no idea why he was telling the headmaster all these things. He had always disliked the man - and insofar as Dumbledore had noted his existence, he had disliked Draco. But... he had no-one else to tell.

It was some comfort to him that his authentically Malfoy manner kept Dumbledore's eyes narrowed throughout the interview.

At its conclusion, he said, 'I assume, Mr Malfoy, that you blame the Gryffindors? Perhaps Mr Weasley tampered with the Potion?'

Draco's blond head snapped up.

'He bloody well did not!'

'Oh?'

'None of them had *anything* to do with it!'

'Is that so?'

Draco's eyes met Dumbledore's. The old man's eyes were very, very wide and innocent.

Draco had the sudden horrible suspicion that he had been tricked.

He let his lip curl.

'Do you really think Weasley would be intelligent enough to tamper with a potion?' he inquired.

Dumbledore got up and smiled beatifically.

'Mr Malfoy, it has been a pleasure talking to you. If you ever feel like you need to talk to me again, please feel free. Can I say that you remind me of a student I had once?'

'Oh, touching bonding type moment,' Draco drawled. 'Could it possibly *be* the reformed Death Eater Professor Snape? Goodness, what an honour. I see the error of my ways. Will you be my new father figure?'

He paused and scowled.

'And my personal hygiene is impeccable, thanks so much.'

'I was really thinking more of Mr Black,' said Dumbledore.

'Oh... what? I remind you of a mass murderer? You're not supposed to say that to a student! That's not motivational speaking. I see a bright future for you, Mr Malfoy - in Azkaban! This is so typical of you do-gooders. I play dirty at Quidditch and suddenly everyone's screaming 'Cheater, cheater, compulsive Death Eater!' and I'm...'

... standing up, yelling at the headmaster and gesticulating wildly.

Way to get expelled.

"Er... I'm most terribly sorry, sir. This whole rat thing has been... a bit traumatic for me. Let's, ah - just forget it about it, shall we? Ah-'

Draco let go of the front of Dumbledore's robes.

Dumbledore offered him his hand.

'As I said - it's been a pleasure, Mr Malfoy.'

Draco's quick grovel had done nothing for his temper. He stared at the outstretched hand, and folded his arms deliberately across his chest.

He lifted cold grey eyes to Dumbledore's face.

The man was still smiling!

Draco turned around and strode out of the door.

A moment later, the door opened again and a dishevelled blond head reappeared around it.

'And I've seen pictures of Black and his frankly appalling hair,' Draco added. 'You complete bastard!'

When he heard Dumbledore laughed, he slammed the door with all his might.

Draco wished he could slam another door as he gave the letter to his eagle owl, Rover. (He had once heard, and rather fancied, the phrase 'Kill Rover kill!')

Which was when Crabbe and Goyle appeared in the common room.

Draco looked up, his smile brittle and bright as jagged glass.

'Boys,' he said. 'Truly excellent to see you.'

Crabbe and Goyle were thick.

Nobody was quite thick enough to see a Malfoy in the kind of mood where they invented new torture implements without feeling a pressing need to be elsewhere.

Draco stood up, slung his arms around their necks and began pulling them in towards their dormitory.

Squeezing in a friendly, affectionate way which made them go blue and gurgle.

'Let's get together, just us guys, and talk about cruelty to animals,' Draco urged with his sweetest and most charming smile, looking far too much like Satan's choirboy.

He dragged them into the dormitory, and shut the door.

Kill Fluffy kill!

His smile was bright and shiny as a knife.

'Let's *chat*.'

\*

'Shhhh, Ron,' Hermione said soothingly. 'I'm sure it was dreadful, but have a nice comforting piece of toast and forget about it. The bad man can't get you now.'

Ron cautiously let his red head lift from his arms.

Draco Malfoy leaned in between Lavender and Parvati to reach the Gryffindor table.

Ron's head slammed back down and connected with the table.

'You lied to me,' he informed Hermione in muffled and reproachful tones.

'Malfoy!' Hermione hissed in outrage. 'Go away!'

He gave her an engaging and angelic smile.

'I'm just picking up my coffee.'

'Your... do you realise that Seamus Finnigan had to be sedated?' Hermione demanded.

Malfoy laughed, a bright carefree laugh which made Lavender and Parvati give a collective sigh.

'No, really?'

Hermione was used to Malfoy's golden-pure looks, and she knew exactly how nasty this pretty boy could be. She simply sneered and looked away.

When Malfoy lifted coffee off the table, Ron launched himself out of his chair and seized him by the robes.

Malfoy stared at him with a mildly astonished and disdainful air.

'Do you mind?'

'Don't you have something to say to me?' Ron snarled.

One pale eyebrow lifted. 'Why, yes. When I told you I would respect you in the morning, I lied.'

Half the Gryffindor table choked.

Hermione grabbed Ron's arm.

'Don't kill him-'

'I'm so touched. I didn't know you cared.'

'You'll get expelled,' Hermione continued stonily.

'I want an *explanation*,' Ron snapped. 'Surely you came over here for something-'

Malfoy shrugged easily out of Ron's grip.

'Just this,' he said, gesturing with the coffee and - oh, purely accidentally - spilling a few strategic and scalding drops. He patted Ron's face with a terribly patronising air. 'And to say good morning, beautiful.'

Hermione hung on to Ron's arm with all her might.

Malfoy turned away still laughing.

Harry and Ginny were coming in the doors of the hall, and they came face to face.

Harry's eyes flashed and he stood firm, the hero determined to combat darkness.

Malfoy's eyes danced with sparkling mischievous light.

'Oh, it's the lovebirds,' he cooed. 'Tell me, Harry, have you started composing Valentines yet? How about 'Her eyes are as brown as a not so fresh pickled toad'?'

Ginny and Harry went a lovely matching shade of scarlet.

Hang on, thought Hermione, since when does Malfoy call Harry by his name?

Malfoy wandered blithely over to his own table, where he was given a hero's welcome.

The prince of Slytherin had returned.

There was just something... bothering Hermione. He was still Malfoy, still an annoying, smart-mouthed brat who swaggered around thinking he owned the world. He was still an irritating bastard with a tongue like a machete.

There was - just something missing.

Like... malice.

Malfoy laughed at something over at his table, and she recognised the simple amusement which had caused his laugh before.

It was almost as if he was playing a game now.

The question was, what kind of game?

A cool grey gaze met hers. Very deliberately, Malfoy winked.

Irritating bastard.

\*

Dumbledore stood up at dinner that night and announced what had happened to Draco Malfoy.

'Mr Malfoy,' he said, 'was placed under a spell. It was an outrageous act and an attempt to wipe out an innocent child.'

All eyes turned to the innocent child, who at the present time had an arm around both Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini, and who was smiling as if he'd just discovered Original Sin and was having great fun with it.

Hermione felt sure this was intentional.

'It was the unjustifiable act of a Dark Wizard,' Dumbledore continued, 'and it must be paid for. I will not have attacks in my school. I will not bear the absolute violence which threatens the existence of another person. Anyone with information on this subject must come forward, or share guilt for something unforgivable.'

He smiled then, when they were all solemn, and produced a piece of paper from his voluminous robes.

'Mr Malfoy has requested that I read out this - er - statement of his feelings. It is addressed to his attacker, and begins-

"Oh, you are going to be *sorry* you were ever born. I'm going to wrap your intestine around a tree until it snaps like twine. I'm going to remove your manhood and serve it to you roasted with barbecue sauce. I'm going to rip you apart atom by atom and record the sounds of your screams to play to your parents, and finally I am going to get Blaise Zabini to spread dirty rumours about you. I have no mercy, and you will not escape. Soil yourself now and save time. Thanks for listening."

Hermione looked up and saw horror and amusement.

There was a curiously unignorable quality about Draco Malfoy. She should know, Harry had been trying to ignore him for years. He refused to be a background, a bit player.

By now, everyone in Hogwarts knew him, and first year students invariably asked who he was. There was always a reply, and never just a name - whether it was 'That's Draco Malfoy, a complete git' or 'That's Draco Malfoy. Isn't he *gorgeous*'?

In a way, both answers were tributes paid to an unusual character.

Hermione found him unusually annoying, but now she realised that there was nobody indifferent to him in the room, whereas he was indifferent to so many of them.

Of course, she thought, Hitler had also been an arresting and noticeable personality.

It didn't make Malfoy any less black-hearted.

'Mr Malfoy,' added Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling as they always did, as if he knew a secret others didn't, 'also asked me to thank the Gryffindors, who treated him with great kindness while he was among them.'

The Gryffindor table erupted into chaos.

Harry and Ginny were asking each other loudly what the meaning of this could be. Dean was restraining Ron from leaping over to the Slytherin table intent on murder. Lavender and Parvati were giggling helplessly. Neville had dived under the table, apparently convinced this was the harbinger of some fiendish Malfoy plot.

Hermione stood up, silently, among the hysterical people to look over at the Slytherin table.

Everyone there was screaming but Malfoy.

He sat perfectly calm, his head tilted back to face the world and his arms folded across his chest, gazing out at the world with absolute assurance and a faint smirk.

And, very gradually, everybody in the Hall went quiet and stared at him.

Malfoy got up and made a sweeping bow.

His eyes raked over the astounded faces and he looked as if he rather badly wanted to laugh, but instead he simply gave that traditional Malfoy smirk and left.

This was going to take some thinking out.

\*

Dumbledore's speech caused such a sensation among the Gryffindors that Hermione was glad when Arithmancy rolled around the next day.

Arithmancy was the only subject she did not share with other Gryffindors, and if she heard one more variation on the theme of 'I-hate-that-sod-Malfoy' she was going to scream.

Of course, Malfoy was in Arithmancy too, but he always took the seat furthest from her and a sea of Ravenclaws separated them, and usually stopped all but the most serious bickering matches.

Hermione was expecting some relief.

She did not expect to go into the room and find Draco Malfoy casually seated at *her* double desk, occupying space she used for *her* notes, bright head bent over an Arithmancy book as if he had every right to be there when everyone knew this was *her* place!

He looked up with a flashing smile as she entered.

'Hi,' he said. 'I thought you could use some company.'

'I'm not stupid, Malfoy,' Hermione said levelly, putting her books down on the desk. 'Tell me what you're really doing here, then get lost.'

Malfoy glanced up at her. His grey eyes were almost exactly like mirrors, opaque and silvery, giving her back simply a lovelier version of herself.

Shards of the Mirror of Erised, if all you cared for was beauty.

'I'm trying to get your attention,' he answered serenely.

Hermione stood and gaped, and then Professor Vector came in and she quickly slipped into her seat.

Only after she had done this did she realise that she was now sitting next to Malfoy.

Bloody, bloody hell.

'You have my attention,' she hissed. 'You always have everyone's attention, don't you? You had my attention when I slapped your face in third year - is that what you want?'

'Heavens, Granger, you kinky thing you,' Malfoy murmured.



Hermione tried not to disrupt the class by having an epileptic fit.

She fought to keep her voice low and level.

'Malfoy. What is it that you want?'

'Oh, you know. A really masculine aftershave. An empire to rule. A harem full of nubile Eastern maidens.' He paused. Smirked. 'Oh, and world peace.'

'Be serious!'

'Ms Granger, be quiet,' Professor Vector said sharply. 'You and Mr Malfoy can have a cosy little talk *after* my lesson.'

Hermione went scarlet. Malfoy opened his book with his most beatific expression.

And that, to Hermione's outrage, was that. Malfoy made no further attempts to annoy her, or talk to her - which of course was the same thing. To all appearances, he was completely absorbed in his Arithmancy.

And he was too shiny.

He distracted you, like something flashing in the landscape. She tried to focus on her Summoning Sums and his too-pale and frankly not all that handsome face would screw up in concentration, and suddenly the sum became gibberish.

The only thing he seemed to notice was the lock of gleaming pale hair which kept falling into his face. He pushed it back every time it did so, a quick motion of ever-increasing irritation.

At the end of the most unproductive Arithmancy lesson ever, he got up and then had to shove back the lock for about the fifteen millionth time.

He rolled his eyes.

'I'm getting this cut. It's quite ridiculous.'

'Oh, and I suppose you're going to start gelling it again? That was ridiculous, if you like,' Hermione snapped. 'It looks much better this way.'

She could have bitten her tongue out.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows.

'I'll keep that in mind, Granger. And I am flattered.'

He smirked, again, and she felt an amazing urge to hit him.

He sauntered off.

She was going to find some Gryffindors, and have a proper conversation with them.

She hated that sod Malfoy.

\*

Draco had once heard that in one person was a constant struggle between his Good self and his Evil self.

Draco had considered this proposition at all angles, and had decided it was all a matter of degrees. For instance, Harry Potter's conflicting selves were probably GoodHarry and NaughtyDesiresToOccasionallyTakeCookiesHarry.

Draco had named his EvilDraco and CompleteBastardDraco.

They usually got on fairly well, and ganged up on other people.

They were having a bit of a disagreement now. He supposed it was all that bad Gryffindor influence.

He had *told* EvilDraco not to play with unsuitable children.

He also missed airing his every thought aloud.

'Hello, Draco,' Pansy cooed as he strode through the common room.

'Go away, I find you unattractive.'

All right, all right, so he was hardly bottling it all up. But still.

Draco slammed into his dormitory bathroom and opened his own special cupboard. An avalanche of hair care products almost killed him.

Draco perched on the sink amid the bottles.

EvilDraco said, What kind of person owns more than his body weight in hair care products?

CompleteBastardDraco pointed out that it got results.

Yes, but...

Was it worth all that time? So his hair had a tiny, tiny tendency to wave at the ends. So what? Who really gave a damn?

It looks much better this way...

Draco Malfoy, you unutterable idiot, what in God's name do you think you're doing with that girl?

Draco looked turned and looked at the mirror.

'Hi there, handsome. I missed you,' it said.

Draco was *tired* of all this angst. Well, all this five minutes of angst. Slytherins worked out an evil plot and got on with it.

Mind you, Gryffindors just acted.

Not that that was the way he wanted to behave now, but...

There were certain moments when it might be just a tiny, tiny relief.

Draco weighed a bottle in his hand.

Then he began to throw them.

He hurled bottle after bottle into the courtyard not far below, threw with vicious emphasis and waited to hear the satisfying crack of bottle against stone.

He heard a yowl and Argus Filch's anguished cry.

'Someone just hit my cat!'

Draco hit the floor.

Crabbe came in, and looked understandably confused. Draco gestured to the window.

Crabbe went over and peered out.

'You! It was you!' howled Filch. 'I'm going to kill you!'

Crabbe looked bewildered and terrified.

Draco, chuckling wickedly, exited the bathroom propelled mainly by his elbows.

That inexplicable angsty stuff descended on him again once he was out and on his feet.

He walked into the common room.

Contrary to what the Gryffindors believed, Slytherins did not spend their free time ritually sacrificing small fluffy animals to the Dark Lord. Blaise, Pansy and Goyle were playing cards.

Okay, yes, it was strip poker. Nevertheless.

Slytherins, though Draco flattered himself he was an extra-special exception, were not the heart of pure evil. They were all fiercely loyal to each other. They knew that the other houses were all arrayed against them.

You heard the whispers. Dark Wizards. Better any house than Slytherin. Nasty bunch.

Right, someone created a house to create murderous fiends. The Sorting Hat must have simply forgotten to mention it.

Draco genuinely liked most of his housemates, and he could find a use for the ones he did not like. He had missed them all when he was in Gryffindor tower.

But...

It was damn cold in this dungeon.

The carved chairs were uncomfortable.

Draco stared into the fire.

Oh, well. At least I make a very handsome brooding hero.

\*

Hermione looked around at the common room in consternation.

The Gryffindors were - there was no other word for it - *drooping*.

Harry and Ginny seemed to have dug themselves into an awkward conversational rut, and they were tripping over words and blushing. Seamus was still slightly dazed, and rocked back and forth a bit too much for comfort.

Dean Thomas had his guitar out, and was looking over music he had planned to play at Fluffy's next public appearance. He seemed too desolate to play a note.

Parvati and Lavender were trying to console themselves, it appeared, with empty milk cartons.

Neville had made a cup of coffee and was now staring at it in blank confusion because he hated coffee.

It had to be the weather, Hermione thought. It was chill and foggy outside, and that must be dampening everyone's spirits. That must be why the common room seemed so... so flat, and lacking in... sparkle.

Ron had his head in his arms.

'Maybe you should go to bed,' Hermione suggested delicately.

'No!' Ron's face was hunted. 'I'm never going to bed again! The bed is evil, the bed has been defiled, the bed must be burned!'

'Um... okay.'

She rested a tentative hand on Ron's shoulder.

'And I can't \*do\* this Potions homework!' Ron wailed. 'Why is it suddenly so hard?'

'I can't imagine.'

'And why is everything so boring?' Ron demanded belligerently. 'What's the *matter* with everyone?'

Ron was simply far too transparent. He made you see his feelings, when you could even conceal your own from yourself.

'Ron, nobody knew,' Hermione soothed him. 'It's okay to miss-'

'*Miss* him?' Ron yelled, reacting far more than he would have if he hadn't believed it. 'Miss that evil prat? Miss that, that, snake in rat's clothing? I don't *miss him*, I-'

The silence behind Ron's voice seemed to intensify, to thicken, as if everyone was staring in astonishment at a point behind him and desperate to see what happened next.

This was, in fact, the case.

'You people really should change your password more often,' drawled Draco Malfoy. 'Any evil prat could just walk in.'

~~~~~

Chapter Nine

Pax Draconis

And all the boys say, why don't he give us some room?

And the girls say, God, I hope he comes back soon...

Hermione had always studied carefully. She had studied books, of course, because she had always loved books.

She had only loved two boys enough to study them, but she had Harry and Ron memorised. She had felt fond of a few other people, and had learned the hidden sides to their character with the same care she used to memorise footnotes - Professor Lupin being a case in point.

She had only ever studied one person because she disliked them.

Professor Snape was an unpleasant teacher, but he did not interfere much with her life. Crabbe and Goyle were easy to read as children's books - short words and deeply uninteresting content.

Draco Malfoy was different.

If he was a book, he appeared to be like one of Hagrid's frightening textbooks - impossible to read and quite frequently vicious. Once you'd taken the trouble to wrestle open the book for a glance, there seemed to be a lot of obscenities, written in flaming script and leaving you with the distressing impression that they were in code.

She had kept trying because the bastard kept bothering them, and besides the commonplace observations that he was vain, nasty and far too good-looking for his own good, she had picked up a few things.

The boy was a complete exhibitionist.

It reflected how spoiled he was. He wanted attention so he grabbed at it. Harry got it without trying, and was embarrassed by it. Ron was desperate for it, but had no idea how to get it or what to do with it.

Draco Malfoy arranged matters so everybody looked at him, everybody knew him, and then wore all those stares with the magnificent carelessness of a prince wearing a mantle when he had a dozen like it at home.

Hermione remembered his vigorous impressions of Harry over at the Slytherin table, which some Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs had wandered over to watch. She recalled his loud, head-turning voice hurling insults and reading out Rita Skeeter articles and creating crowds wherever he went. She knew how he could seize attention, absorb all the light in a room, whether it was by pretending he had been savaged by a Hippogriff

or mocking a Valentine or just strolling around school in a the-ground-is-so-lucky-I'm-walking-on-it way.

Or by just standing here now, looking at all the stunned Gryffindors with a faintly amused smile on his face.

'Malfoy!' Ron exploded at last. 'What are you doing here?'

He tossed Ron a glance.

'Well, I was hoping to catch Potter in the showers for a cuddle,' he drawled. 'I'm collecting the entire set of Gryffindor boys, don't you know.'

There was a thump from the other end of the room. Very few people looked away from Malfoy.

'Malfoy, how could you!' Hermione cried. 'Seamus is *delicate*!'

'Oh, the Irish can handle anything,' Malfoy said dismissively. 'And they handle it very well, too. I visited last summer.'

'Lavender!' hissed Hermione.

'Oh? Uh,' said Lavender, tearing her eyes off Malfoy and rushing to help her fallen boyfriend.

Seamus made feeble and incoherent gurgling noises.

'So, no chance with Potter then?' Malfoy inquired. 'And here I had my heart set on my very own Gryffindor hot water bottle. I warn you, I shall not sleep. Thank you, Longbottom.'

Thankfully, for the sanity of all concerned, Malfoy had not just expressed gratitude because Neville was going to be his hot water bottle.

Neville looked at his empty hand. His stunned expression was induced either by the fact his coffee had just disappeared, or that Malfoy had actually thanked him.

Draco sipped at the cup and gazed over the rim at the room with innocent silver eyes.

We're all watching him in slack-jawed fascination, Hermione thought with annoyance. As if he's a movie.

The worst thing was that it was all *much* more interesting than moping about a rat.

Malfoy strode over to the fire and stretched out casually in front of it. Hermione was waiting for someone (*cough* Ron *cough*) to lose it and kick (and maybe punch) him out. His absolute barefaced cheek seemed to be holding everyone spellbound.

At this point Hermione's traitorous cat went rushing over to curl on Malfoy's stomach, purring like the Hogwarts Express.

Half the girls in the room looked madly envious.

'Crookshanks!' Hermione exclaimed.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. 'You really have a talent for naming things, don't you, Hermione? Poor kitty. Good kitty. Yes, you are a cute kitty.'

To think that Hermione would see the day when Malfoy would be cuddling her cat.

Although to hear Harry tell it, the Gryffindor boys had seen something a whole lot more traumatic.

'I like cats,' Malfoy proceeded in amiable tones, seeming blissfully unconscious that the entire room was gaping at him. 'Crookshanks and I got acquainted while I was a rat. He has some good stories. Have you heard about his unfortunate misunderstanding concerning Professor McGonagall in feline form?'

To a background of gasps and giggles, Hermione said furiously, 'You're making that up, Malfoy!'

'Would I lie to you, baby?'

Hermione choked on her rage.

'This is just like *'Truly Madly Deeply'*,' Lavender whispered rapturously to Parvati. 'When Lance returned to Priscilla to the shock of all the parish, and then she turned out to be his mother!'

Malfoy grabbed a chair and placed himself in their thrilled midst.

'Lance is Priscilla's mother?' he said. 'But what about the baby?'

'Ah, it's really Greg's baby,' answered Parvati, slightly disconcerted.

'But Greg is Priscilla's son too!' Malfoy exclaimed in an agitated manner.

'Oh no, you see, Greg and Lance were switched at birth,' Parvati informed him sagely, getting into the spirit of things.

'Wait, isn't Greg married to Frances?'

'Yes, but it turns out Frances is really a man!'

'So that's what the mystery bottle of aftershave meant! I'd been wondering about that for ages.'

When Hermione had begged for a special TV in order to catch the news, she had not expected that her roommates would get addicted to weird and involved Muggle soaps.

She had certainly not expected that Malfoy would do so.

The entire room was watching Malfoy making extravagant gestures and discussing warped incestuous affairs with great animation.

Well, they'd always suspected these were the kind of things Slytherin were into.

Ron made a disgusted noise and got back to staring blankly at his Potions homework.

Malfoy tipped over dangerously in his chair to have a look.

'You have to add Boomslang skin there,' he pointed out in helpful if utterly condescending tones. 'Otherwise you die.'

Ron scowled. 'I don't need your help.'

'No, Weasley, you really do. You bring new meaning to the term 'inept.'"

'And stop bothering me!'

'I'd hate to be a barrier in your glorious progress to academic failure.'

'Why don't you leave Ron alone,' Hermione snapped, to Seamus' hysterical nodding, 'and tell us what you're doing here?'

'Certainly, dear lady,' said Malfoy. 'I'm here for revenge. And all the party favours I can carry.'

The Gryffindors looked blank.

Draco reflected that this was not an uncommon look on them.

'Consider this,' he told them brightly. 'I get turned into a rat. Tra la la. Who should little Draco suspect? After all, I was in a room filled with my minions, love slaves and - oh, yes - deadly enemies. Hm, this is a tricky one.'

'Maybe the Slytherins just felt as if they had to get rid of you,' Hermione suggested. 'I feel such empathy.'

Malfoy pursed that curling mouth, apparently considering this.

'Nah,' he concluded. 'We Slytherins are a sweet and simple folk. Why mess around with Transfiguration when perfectly good homicide is an option?'

Actually, the more he spoke the better homicide sounded to Hermione.

Malfoy leaned back in his chair, stretching luxuriously. Every female in the common room leaned in to get a closer look.

Hermione glanced over at Ginny in shocked reproach. Ginny shrugged.

Honestly, redheads were such vixens.

'So I'm going to be hanging around here for a bit,' Malfoy concluded happily. 'Bringing a little ray of sunlight into your lives. Ornamenting this tasteless common room. And plotting to capture and torture one of your kind.'

Dean Thomas's nervous hand struck an extremely discordant note on his guitar.

Malfoy looked thrilled and launched himself off the chair.

Hermione was disgusted to note that he did this with the graceful poise of one aware that everyone who was anyone precipitated themselves off chairs these days.

'Wow, is that a Muggle instrument? The kind that plays Muggle music? Like the Beatles?' asked Malfoy.

Hermione could *hear* him spelling Beatles wrong.

Dean agreed cautiously that it was.

'Great!' Draco said. 'Teach me how to make noise.'

*

And... that was how it was.

Parvati and Lavender were floating on pink clouds of bliss. Ginny (Vixen!) seemed mildly entertained. Dean actually seemed to be getting friendly with Malfoy. (Never trust a guitar player.) Neville ran errands for him.

Harry was appalled, and Ron kept closing his eyes and wishing it all away. Seamus was having Prozac sent from home.

Hermione was observing.

She observed Malfoy lying in her bedroom amid a pile of giggling girls, watching *'Truly, Madly, Deeply'* with total fascination.

Switching on music as well seemed to give him an attack of joyful schizophrenia.

He cheerfully stole Dean's guitar, and became good at it within the week. Then he utterly refused to give it back.

When shown Dean's football posters, he tortured the figures with pins in an effort to make them squirm.

He played Exploding Snap and cheated blatantly. He did not seem to understand the concept of playing fair, even after numerous explanations.

Then he challenged Ron to a game of wizards' chess, and won. He proceeded to sing his own praises for forty minutes, upon which Ron hit him with the chessboard.

He nicked Harry's copy of 'Quidditch Through the Ages' and read it from cover to cover, then had a shouting match with Harry about the Wronski Feint, which ended up in them hitting each other with their broomsticks.

Which made Seamus dribble about symbolism and run for his Prozac.

The Slytherins were comforted by the fact that their captain was off in the line of duty, driving the Gryffindors out of their little minds.

Hermione thought every aspect of his behaviour was disgraceful, and that he was quite possibly the most irritating person in the world.

She was horrified by the fact she was getting used to him.

*

'Tell me, why are you prancing around in your underwear?'

This most Malfoyesque line was drawled by their only specimen of that accursed breed. He was lying by the fire with Crookshanks on his chest, his usual spot (that they should have a usual spot for Malfoy! The *shame!*)

Dean Thomas looked down at his jeans and then looked mildly surprised.

'Er - have you been at Seamus' Prozac? Because, um, that stuff's not healthy.'

'But it's so fun,' Draco complained. 'Anyway, the selfish Irish bugger won't let me near it. I was just commenting on your state of undress.'

'Undress?'

'If you hope to incite the females into a lustful frenzy, I suggest you invest in a Polyjuice Potion and pay me a scandalous amount for some of my hair.'

'Malfoy, stop your wittering,' said Harry almost tolerantly from a chair.

Did everyone see that? Hermione demanded inside her head. He grows on you! The boy is tall, blond and devastating cancer!

'I don't understand,' Dean said. 'Ah - mother sent me new Levi's for my birthday. I can wear them in the common room.'

Malfoy laughed his charming - hateful! - laugh.

'Right. 'Levi's.' Like that's a word.'

He'd said the same thing about 'morals' yesterday.

It was Hermione who realised what he was on about, and explained. 'They're Muggle clothes. Remember, like people wear at the Quidditch World Cup?'

Clearly, Malfoys didn't bother with this kind of subterfuge. Hermione remembered a wizard running around in a dress at the Quidditch World Cup in fourth year. Highborn wizards were woefully ill-informed about the Muggle world.

'Muggles wear underwear in the street? It must be a scene of depravity and public orgies!' said Draco. He looked wistful. 'I wish I could go.'

'You've never been to the Muggle world?' Ron asked, giving up the pretence that he wasn't listening.

'Of course I've never been in the Muggle world!' Draco informed him severely. 'The very idea... My parents would be horrified.'

Ron looked almost sympathetic.

'I know, my parents don't even let Percy go into Knockturn Alley yet.'

'Oh, Knockturn Alley? Charming place. Played marbles there as a child.'

'With shrunken heads as befits a Malfoy?' Hermione interjected with maximum sarcasm.

Draco smiled dreamily. 'I love that game.'

'Listen, I am not wearing underwear!' exclaimed Dean. 'Uh. That is to say...'

'It looks just like underwear,' Draco objected.

Harry looked puzzled. 'What kind of underwear are you wearing?'

Seamus, who had just come in, looked around in terror and began to hyperventilate.

'You know... Ordinary underwear,' Draco replied. 'Long johns.'

Ron choked.

Dean shook his head.

'Look, I don't care if you Gryffindors wear scandalous apparel with hippos on them and now these jean-underwear things,' Draco said primly.

'They're not underwear!' Dean snapped. 'Look, this is ridiculous. Come up to my room. Uh - you might have to take off your long johns.'

Draco followed, looking rather intrigued.

Seamus hit the floor in a dead faint as the door shut.

Lavender was propping him up when Draco Malfoy returned, wearing a black T-shirt and jeans.

She dropped him.

'Um... they didn't look like that on Dean,' Parvati murmured.

'Muh,' Lavender moaned faintly.

Ginny had her eyes shut and was mouthing 'I love Harry' to herself desperately.

Turned out there was a world of difference between Dean's thin and somewhat gangly shape, and Draco's slim and leanly muscled version.

Draco looked at himself.

'Bit weird,' he said critically, looking downwards. A swathe of silver-blond fell into his face. 'Somewhat indecent. There's that to be said for it, of course.'

He moved sideways experimentally.

'Ungh,' said Lavender.

'Okay,' Dean said. 'Do you see now they're not underwear? Give them back now.'

Parvati appeared to be promising God that if he did she would be good for the *rest of her life*.

'I think,' Draco replied, surveying the girls' faces, 'I'll keep them on for just a while.'

'Malfoy, take them off!'

Seamus opened his eyes, and then swooned again.

'I'll just keep them on for a tiny moment longer,' Draco promised solemnly.

Dean's trousers had gone the same way as his guitar.

'Hermione?' Harry said in a concerned voice. 'Are you all right? You've gone all red.'

'Fine! Fine! Never better!' Hermione said quickly, hiding her face in a book.
'Absolutely jeans. I mean, great!'

*

Draco's jeans caused a sensation at dinner that night.

Several girls seemed to be composing Valentines (on December the fifteenth!) Pansy Parkinson looked disbelieving that all these ritual baby sacrifices were finally paying off.

There was a slightly less ecstatic reaction from Professor McGonagall.

'Mr. Malfoy! What kind of get-up do you call that?'

Malfoy gazed up at her with limpid silver eyes. 'My uniform,' he said humbly.

'Excuse me?'

'It says in the rules that the uniform can be altered to suit the student's preference,' Draco explained innocently. 'I checked.'

McGonagall looked at the black material of his shirt and trousers.

Draco gave her a winning look.

Professor McSuddenOddResemblanceToSnape stalked off.

'Oh, I *so* put the 'man' in manipulation,' Draco said. 'Longbottom, coffee.'

His cup had been lying by Neville's elbow for some time as Neville watched the showdown. Neville made to get it, and knocked it over.

They all looked at it.

Well, coffee rarely burns through the tablecloth.

'It seems the rogue Gryffindor has finally opted for homicide,' Draco said in the nasty pause. 'Longbottom, different and less fatal coffee.'

'Ah... did you really make those clothes out of your uniform?' asked Neville, trying desperately to start up the conversation.

'Do I look like a house elf to you?'

And Hermione, who had been feeling sick with something like fear, was able to sneer properly at Draco as he sauntered back casually to his own table.

Okay, maybe she ogled too. A tiny bit.

She was only human.

But she didn't care what happened to him. Not at all.

'I wish he'd get struck by lightning,' Ron said.

'Um, yeah,' Hermione agreed. 'Me too.'

*

Draco did not show up at the Gryffindor common room that night.

Five minutes after his usual time, panic reigned.

'He's only a little rat!' Ron was shouting. 'They've done something terrible to him!'

Lavender was sniffing disconsolately into a handkerchief.

'You cannot *trust* those Slytherins,' Harry was saying darkly.

'They are *very bad people*,' Parvati chipped in tearfully.

'Have you all lost your marbles?' Hermione demanded. 'He's Malfoy! A.k.a the star of Slytherin, the perpetrator of terrible deeds, the kind of bad person who eats lesser bad people for breakfast!'

'I remember how he used to dip his ickle paws into coffee,' Ron said, looking on the point of tears.

'And how his little nose used to twitch,' Harry added.

Seamus began to twitch all over.

'He's so cute and helpless,' Lavender mourned.

'Has *everyone* been on Seamus' Prozac?'

Ron gave Hermione a reproachful look.

'Fine then,' he said. 'Harry, *we'll* get your Cloak and wrest poor Fluffy from the grasp of evil!'

'Look, if he's in the grasp of evil he's probably going to be ticked if you interrupt them!'

'Some people just don't *care*,' Ron added, glaring.

In the end, Hermione decided to go with them. Not that she was at all worried. But someone had to keep those boys out of trouble.

*

Draco was drifting peacefully off to sleep.

I'm just a little muffin on a griddle, he thought. Toasty warm and... well, probably not about to be spread with cream and jam, but you can't ask for everything.

Some stuff you have to steal when people aren't looking.

He was just about to fall into sweet slumber when he became aware of odd voices outside his door. They seemed to be trying to be sneaky but failing.

Couldn't be Slytherins. Probably just a dream.

'Where are we going?'

'Well, his bedroom...'

'Oh, I *knew* this was a bad plan...'

'Wstfgl,' said Draco, an expression of haughty irritation which came out a bit muffled. Stupid dream. Why was he having such a stupid dream? Uncle Ethelfride had started off with funny dreams...

Harry, Ron and Hermione burst in the door.

And then he had progressed to full-on hallucinations.

'Oh, hi, Malfoy,' Harry said. 'Um, we were just coming to check if you were alive.'

Hang on, that gormless speech *had* to be genuine Gryffindor.

Draco clutched the bedsheets.

'Hermione!' he said in horror. 'Get out! I'm not decent!'

Harry glanced over.

'You're wearing cuddly pyjamas,' he pointed out.

'That's what I mean!'

Hermione, who had been somewhat distracted by the sight of Draco looking rumpled and adorable - that is, stupid! - in his pyjamas, recollected herself and fixed him with a cold look.

'Where have you been, young man?' she demanded.

'Oh, don't,' Draco begged. 'You sound just like Professor McGruesome. I had a headache, and I went to bed. Possibly the most innocent thing I have ever done. Why are you people here?'

'Er...'

'They were frantic,' Hermione explained coolly.

'Oh, you came too,' Harry mumbled in rebellion.

'You were frantic,' Draco repeated flatly.

'Well, this is a dangerous place,' Harry muttered.

'I'm a dangerous person,' Draco said smugly. 'And I've lived here for almost seven years! You pillock.'

Draco did not believe in beating around the bush.

Just beat the bush. Teach it a lesson.

'Honestly, you people are pathetic,' he continued cheerfully. 'Couldn't you do without me for one night? Why this mad rush to my side?'

Harry, the straightforward one, was looking slightly nauseated as he contemplated the answer.

'I guess... and don't think I'm not reconsidering this in light of your 'You people are pathetic' speech... we might, kind of, sort of, after the rat thing and all, slightly like you,' he concluded.

Draco's silvery eyes widened.

'Oh.'

Hermione took advantage of the rare moment of Draco's silence to try and find a way of truthfully denying this shocking allegation.

She couldn't.

Bugger.

When all else fails, become brisk and capable. This is a weapon of doom.

'Well, *if* we do - you know, that thing,' she said, 'we have a few questions for you.'

Draco looked wary. 'Is this like a test? Do I have to submit some sort of project?'

They all sat on the bed.

'Oh, do make yourselves at home. I'm not trying to get some sleep.'

'It's just to check you're not evil,' Harry reassured him.

Draco gave him an incredulous look. 'What? I *am* evil, Potter. Coo-eee. Where have you *been*?'

'We know that you're a dishonest, amoral prat, Malfoy,' Hermione said.

Draco looked gratified.

'We're just checking for 'pawn of the Dark Lord' status.'

'Malfoys are not the pawns of evil,' Draco muttered. 'Malfoys are the lieutenants of evil.'

'Ahem,' said Hermione. 'If your father instructed you to grovel in the dirt before your master, you would...?'

'In my new clothes? Sod off!'

'If instructed to perform a rite of darkness, you would...?'

'Forget all about it and wander off for a drink. I don't do responsibility.'

'Your approach to the Dark Mark would be...?'

'Oh, so tacky and unappealing. Can't evil be tasteful, I ask you? Not to mention, well, is this person evil? Let's check out the whacking big mark on their arm. Wicked inconspicuous, I don't think. Call themselves Slytherins! Ha!'

'This bit is important,' Harry said urgently. 'If instructed to cut off your hand in Voldemort's dark service...'

'Disfigure myself, Potter? You sick, sick bastard!'

The Gryffindor gaggle stopped and looked at each other.

'Well...' Hermione said. 'Technically, he passed. But it all seems so wrong.'

Draco preened.

Harry put his hand over Draco's.

'I guess you're on the team,' he said with a boyish smile.

'There's no necessity to touch me, Potter,' Draco told him in alarm. 'You know all that was a joke, right? Do you mind getting off my bed now?'

'We mean, you have to be good now,' Ron explained.

'Ha! Good luck!'

'Well, at least marginally less evil,' Hermione conceded.

'Do I get to sleep if I agree?'

'Yes!'

'Is there a salary?'

'No!'

'Oh... fine then.'

'You see, Draco?' Harry said heartily. Draco looked slightly nauseated. 'Isn't this nice? It could have been like this years ago if you hadn't been such a prat on the train!'

'I was *not*!' Draco exclaimed in outrage. 'This red-haired lummock laughed at my name! I had to make him rue the day.'

The Gryffindors just looked at him.

'Well, I'm sensitive about my name,' Draco grumbled. 'It's in the school motto, you know. I was called that and then sent here. Parents can be so cruel. Why didn't they simply call me Neville Longbottom Malfoy and be done with it?'

Ron did not seem to feel Draco's pain, the unsympathetic git.

'So you spent seven years making our lives a misery because you're touchy about your name?' he demanded.

'We Malfoys are a vengeful race,' Draco answered.

'You're sick...' Hermione said, as they left.

The last thing she saw was that disturbingly flattered look on Draco's face.

Only Hermione was under the Cloak as they closed the door. Harry and Ron turned to face the person staring blankly at them in the Slytherin corridor.

'Hi,' said Harry with his innocent grin. 'We were just visiting Draco. I wouldn't go in there though, he's in bed.'

A few minutes later, all the Slytherins had to forcibly prevent Pansy Parkinson from committing suicide.

Then they sent an emergency appeal for some of Seamus' Prozac.

Once outside, Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged slightly startled looks.

'So... we like Malfoy, then?' Ron said in doubtful tones.

'Seems so,' Harry returned.

Pause.

'So,' inquired Ron, 'have the seas turned to blood, and is it a month of blue moons?'

'I'm sure the weather report will inform us,' Hermione said.

*

There was speculation about the Gryffindor/Ravenclaw Quidditch match.

People wondered whether Ron Weasley would support his best friend or his best girl, and were entertained to see him flying from end to end of the pitch yelling, 'Go Harry!' 'Go honey!'

People also wondered whether Draco Malfoy would sit in the Slytherin benches or with the Gryffindors he seemed to be spending so much time with.

Another topic of interest was whether Draco would wear his jeans.

He did.

Professor Snape called him a stain upon the Slytherin name. Blaise Zabini called him a sex bunny.

He decided they evened out.

And Hermione was oddly unsurprised to see Draco climbing up the Gryffindor bleachers, waving aloft a huge green and silver flag.

'I claim this seat in the name of Slytherin,' he announced, and sat down beside her. 'Hi, darling.'

'Hello, Malfoy,' Hermione responded. 'I've been researching Polyjuice Potion.'

'Scholarly women are cute,' Draco told her approvingly. 'Could you get a pair of those little gilt glasses?'

Hermione gave him a look. He seemed unabashed.

Of course, people who mooned nunneries probably had more sense of decency than Malfoy.

'It seems that you can use the problems that occur using the Potion to Transfigure yourself into an animal to make the state permanent - or at least until the spell is broken in, ah, the traditional-'

'Yes, yes,' said Draco. 'Please skip ahead.'

'But it would be very complicated,' Hermione told him earnestly. 'I can't see anyone being good enough at Potions to do it - except for you, and me, and Blaise Zabini.'

'Well, it wasn't Blaise,' Draco said instantly. 'She thinks I'm a sex bunny. And you're female, so you probably do too.'

Hermione choked.

'If I could just remember some detail about this person,' Draco mused, absently thumping her on the back.

He thought.

That time he had bitten this person...

They'd *tasted* of something...

Something... He couldn't quite put his finger on it... But he'd recognise it again.

'Stop... hitting... me...' Hermione gasped.

Draco Malfoy stood up, and made an announcement

'I have to lick every Gryffindor in the school!'

There was a thump, much like a certain Chaser falling off his broom.

If this sort of thing continued, Seamus was going to have permanent brain damage.

~~~~~

## Chapter Ten

### Passion, Perps and Prozac

*With a woman it's imperative you show her that you love her  
Baby don't you know it's her prerogative to change like the weather  
I'm seeing the signs  
You know I used to think that love was blind  
Well fool I'm a woman  
Fool I'm a woman  
And I'm about to change my...  
And I just changed my mind*

Hermione seized Draco as Madam Pomfrey ran onto the pitch to assist Seamus.

'Sit down and shut up!'

Draco tilted his head, strands of silver and gold falling into his face, and altered his tone of voice as he noticed Hermione's hand on his.

He turned his fingers deftly, captured hers, and suddenly Hermione was staring in horror at a lazily wicked pair of grey eyes looking at her over her hand.

'Don't worry,' he said in a low purr. 'You're first on my list.'

Hermione reflected that people like Malfoy should be forced to take a test proving they could be trusted out on the streets looking so gorgeous.

She also reflected that in such a test, Malfoy would have failed and then shamelessly tried to seduce the examiner.

While thus distracted, she neglected to yank her hand away.

Bad mistake.

As she became extremely aware when she felt curling lips open on her palm, and something warm trace along her lifeline.

She stared at Draco in shock. Those eyes danced amid the locks of that hair, like dust motes glinting in golden sunlight.

All attention suddenly left the Quidditch pitch.

Draco released her hand a second before Hermione had the chance to snatch it away in outrage.

'No, not you,' he said. 'Oh dear. I feel this is going to be a long day. Who's next? Anyone volunteer?'

Hermione was almost killed in the rush.

\*

Harry Potter, The Boy Who Was Just No Fun, had to call half time and convince Draco that this was no way to find the master criminal.

Neither Parvati nor Lavender spoke to him for weeks.

Millicent Bulstrode commented on Harry's masterful manner until Harry borrowed some of Seamus' Prozac.

Then he weaved slightly as he flew for the rest of the match.

Hermione refused to answer Lavender and Parvati's urgent inquiries, and was extremely relieved when Lavender went off to visit Seamus in the infirmary.

'But Hermione,' Parvati wailed, 'if you would just tell me what-'

'No!' said Hermione.

She, Harry, Ron and Ginny were sitting around the table composing a letter to Mrs Weasley, and Hermione tried very hard to project an air of being Really-Far-Too-Busy-To-Talk-About-Malfoy,-Yes-Even-About-How-He-Smells-And-That-Means-You-Parvati.

A hand tapped her on the shoulder.

Hermione snapped. 'All *right*! Fine, he smells like oranges, if you have to know! Oranges and winter nights and-'

'Do go on,' Draco said solicitously. 'I was most interested.'

Hermione went quiet.

'What are you doing, my little Gryffindolts?' Draco inquired amiably, pulling up a chair.

'We all write a letter to my mum together,' Ron answered warily, remembering about fifty thousand insults to his entire family.

Draco's memory seemed rather defective, except on the subject of sweets.

There he was spot on.

'You mean the woman who sent that excellent coffee cake to you last week? That was really good.'

'Well, we wouldn't know, would we?' asked Harry. 'Since you ate it all.'

'You can write something too, if you like,' said Ginny, who seemed to have a bit of a soft spot for Malfoy.

Hermione often wondered why she had surrounded herself with redheads.

Mrs Weasley's letter ended up bemusing and horrifying her slightly.

Dear Mum,

It's Ron and Ginny again! In answer to your question of the past five letters, yes, Ron really does have a girlfriend.

Really. - Ginny.

Ginny and Harry are going out, but neither of them is planning the names of your future grandchildren yet. Sorry. - Ron.

I'm sure we would have liked your cake, but an owl ate it.

The articles in the 'Daily Prophet' about mad orgies in the Gryffindor boys' dormitory were greatly exaggerated. - Ginny.

Total lies! - Ron.

And if they weren't lies, they certainly didn't happen to me. - Ron.

I need another bedsheet. Someone ran off with mine. - Ron.

The story about Gryffindors on drugs has a tiny grain of truth in it, however. We call him Seamus Finnigan. - Ginny.

Er, I can't take Fluffy home from the holidays to show you. He'd need an extra bed, and anyway his father would storm into the house and kill us all. - Ron.

Long story. He's writing a PostScript at the end. - Ginny.

We were sorry to read in your letter that the Gryffindors of sixth year had a worse reputation than the Slytherins. There is an explanation for that. Like we said, he's writing a postscript at the end.

Remember to tell the neighbours that I have a girlfriend! - Ron.

Love, Ginny and Ron.

P.S. - Dear Mrs Weasley, thanks so much for the sweater. Have won my 999<sup>th</sup> Quidditch match. Have not yet conquered the Dark Lord, but am working on it! My intentions towards your daughter are entirely honourable. I'm sure I would have enjoyed that coffee cake, but - I think someone dropped it. - Harry.



P.P.S - Dear Mrs Weasley, I'm top of the year again. Thank you for asking, I do work hard. I don't really want you to set me up with Percy for the Yule Ball, though. I'd write more, but the forces of evil are jogging my elbow. - Hermione.

P.P.P.S. - Salutations. I am Draco Malfoy. Remember me? I saw you four years ago when your husband was on top of my father. I really liked your coffee cake, and I will return Ron's bedsheet. I am in the process of corrupting the entire tower, including your two youngest spawn.

Sooooo... seven kids, huh? Mr Weasley must be Viking in the sack. - Draco

They enclosed a photograph. When Mrs Weasley saw the disreputable blond in the jeans and the sunglasses leering on the left, she almost fell down.

\*

'That's a letter for us from Mrs Weasley,' Harry said, 'and an injunction to stay away from her babies addressed for you.'

'So nice to be appreciated,' murmured Draco. 'Unless I get at least one death threat a day, I feel like I'm not making an impact.'

At this juncture Hermione strode in, and flashed a distraught gaze upon them all.

She saw the boys collected in front of the fire. Harry curled up with 'Quidditch Through the Ages,' Neville busy making coffee, Ron setting up the chessboard with a determined look and Malfoy lounging in a chair with the air of an elegant pale-blond cat, long jeans-clad legs stretched out before him.

She dismissed them all with a perfunctory greeting.

'Pleasure, Harry.'

'A joy, Ron.'

'Enchanted, Neville.'

'Sod off, Malfoy.'

'I like to think we have a special connection,' remarked Draco, stretching gracefully.

Hermione stomped off to the girls' dormitories.

'Don't mind her,' said Harry. 'She always gets like this when she realises that the Christmas holidays will be over soon, and she hasn't started studying for summer.'

'Now, Malfoy,' Ron said grimly, 'let's see who's the Chess Champi-'

The chessboard was knocked off the table by a suddenly alert and panicked blur of blond.

'Oh my God!' he exclaimed. 'She's *right*! What have I been *thinking*? Oh, I bet *everyone* else has started studying by now! Damn those tricky Ravenclaws!'

'Er,' said Neville, blinking.

'There is no *time* for chess, you imbecilic redhead! There is no time to breathe! Oh, oh, death, ruin, academic failure!'

Exit Draco Malfoy, apparently pursued by an invisible bear.

Ron blinked. 'Well, that was... distinctly terrifying.'

\*

'Don't you people get it?' Hermione asked somewhat hysterically. 'Colour-coded charts are the only way to revise. Without them, we are doomed!'

'Quiet, Hermione,' Parvati said crossly. 'Gary is just about to have his baby.'

'I don't care!'

The other girls found this tantamount to treason.

Hermione remained indifferent, and began to arrange her revision notes alphabetically. She had to make a chart. She should have made a chart *weeks* ago, there was something terribly the matter with her, rats turning into boys all over the place had distracted her... but the teachers were not going to accept Draco Malfoy as a reason for a grades drop.

Parvati and Lavender had tried last year.

Well, that's it, Hermione promised herself. I'm not going near him again. I won't even look at him in the corridors.

Draco came in.

There was general uproar.

'Malfoy!' Parvati shrieked. 'This is the *girls' dormitory*! We could have been naked!'

Malfoy bit his lip. 'Maybe next time.'

He glanced over at Hermione, who was giving him a cold look over her notes.

'Hi,' he said. 'I was thinking we could study together.'

Hermione raised her eyebrows. 'I don't know what you think you're doing, Malfoy, but I happen to be actually serious-'

'I know, I know,' Draco interrupted, pushing his hair back with a distraught gesture. 'I'm not serious about it. I've been totally neglectful with all this rat stuff. The Ravenclaws probably began to study months ago, but we have to make do with what we have. All I can think of is making more detailed notes on our class notes, possibly with reference to more advanced texts, and of course-'

He turned and dragged something from the threshold.

'A colour-coded chart.'

Hermione gave him a long look.

'All right,' she conceded. 'We could try it.'

'But Gary's having his baby, Draco!'" Parvati protested.

Draco dived for Hermione's bed.

Once he had snatched what he wanted, he looked reproachfully at Parvati, two pillows clutched to his ears.

'Tempt me not with your siren song, woman!' He turned back to Hermione. 'So. Let's talk Arithmancy.'

\*

'Can you believe that Hagrid hasn't set a written again?'

'I call it an outrage,' Draco said. 'I mean, why did I spend all my time making notes on 'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them'?

'You just get so discouraged.'

'Yes, *exactly*.'

Hermione had never had this much fun outside the library.

Malfoy was lying on her bed, blond head pillowed on his arm, and doing incredible things to her Arithmancy notes with a highlighter.

Once '*Truly Madly Deeply*' was over the others had cleared out, away from the crazed scholarly folk.

Hermione was just about to bring up the subject of Charms when Malfoy looked over at her again.

'You know,' he said in meditative tones, 'the way your nose wrinkles when you're excited is really extremely fetching.'

This bed is too small!

Hermione valiantly pretended that she had not heard.

'You're blushing,' observed Draco the demon after approximately three seconds.

'I always blush when I study,' Hermione answered stiffly and absurdly. She wished she could get off the bed without seeming self-conscious.

She stopped and recalled that this awful boy had, in fact, shared her bed plenty of times before. In fact, she recalled one night when she had talked to Fluffy about... about her lack of success with *boys*...

Oh, God.

Hermione's face thumped into a pillow.

After a moment, she felt a hand on her hair.

'I mean, I was turned into a rat and infiltrated Gryffindor tower for you,' Draco commented in a neutral tone. 'What else do I have to do?'

'You were turned into a rat by a lunatic against your consent,' Hermione told him in a muffled voice.

'Well, yes. But must you obsess over every detail? What I'm asking you is a question. What else do I have to do?'

Hermione lifted her face and found grey eyes disturbingly close.

'There's nothing you can do,' she snapped. 'The answer is no.'

Malfoy bent forward.

Hermione slapped him.

'I said the answer was no!'

Draco smiled and leaned back.

'Oh, well. At least it's body contact.'

Hermione stared at her hand. She had never been a violent person. She had never touched anyone else in anger before.

Anyone *else*.

I don't like being out of control, Hermione thought.

'Get out.'

'If I go, my chart goes with me.'

Talk about tempting with siren songs.

'Oh...' Hermione sighed angrily. 'All right. But pull up a chair.'

Draco stretched luxuriously.

'Why? I'm very comfortable here.'

Gahhhh...

\*

Hermione had always planned on a sensible relationship. She had a methodical mind, and planned her life very much as she planned her study timetable.

Her future was all but colour-coded.

Even the Weasley's' loving home was too full and muddled for her taste, Mr Weasley more eccentric than she would have chosen. Hermione wanted the picture postcard version, a scrubbed white kitchen, a Labrador, white picket fence, two charming toddlers and a loving, dependable partner who understood Muggle and wizard culture.

Ron Weasley had been given the push because he was too intense. Hermione was waiting for perfection.

Her idea of perfection was nothing like Draco Malfoy.

Hermione had had an idea that her ideal would have brown eyes, be kind to animals... be everything, in short, that Draco Malfoy was not.

Draco Malfoy, bigot, narcissist, spawn of Death Eaters. Draco Sorry-I-Was-In-The-Bathroom-When-They-Gave-Out-Morals Malfoy. Too good-looking to be safe, too self-obsessed to be loving, too Malfoy to be dependable.

Draco Malfoy was most emphatically not what Hermione had in mind.

So, she decided to ignore this new idea of his, this insane notion of them together. She hoped that he would get the hint, and she told herself that she was being very mature, and she was quite sure that nothing he could do would change her mind.

Draco Malfoy, on the other hand, did not plan his future.

He was used to getting what he wanted, though. And he was not used to taking no for an answer.

\*

Hermione had a very peaceful time of it the next day. There was no Draco insisting on studying with her, forcing her to watch imbecilic programmes or causing a commotion.

He had stopped harassing her. Everything was back to normal.

Which was very nice. And she was not being irritable or distracted at all, Harry Potter, thank you very much!

If that boy made any more such observations, she'd hit him with her fork.

Hermione glanced over to the Slytherin table - just making sure that Malfoy was in his place! Just because...

He wasn't in his place.

Hermione's mind filled with randomised dread just as the lights in the Great Hall went down, and the dread became intense and very specific.

'And now,' Dumbledore said, 'Mr Malfoy has requested the honour of favouring us with a song.'

Draco appeared, walking slowly and holding Dean Thomas' guitar. The dim light reflected off his hair, making it glow like a halo. Beneath that moonbeam shine, his eyes sparkled wickedly.

A hundred breaths caught in a hundred girls' throats.

He leaned forward over the guitar, shadows underlining angular cheekbones and sweeping lashes.

Hermione was furious to find herself mesmerised.

Oh no, oh please don't let him be-

He was coming over, making his way directly to hers. His eyes were blatantly fixed on her and the look in them was distinctly... evil.

He knew she didn't want this! And he knew, damn him, he knew exactly how aware she was of him right now, he knew that she wasn't going to leave!

He began to sing, fingers gliding across the guitar strings, voice lower and huskier than his speaking voice.

Hermione was appalled to find herself shivering.

They all sat there fascinated, watching him, quivering as the strings did under his hand. He was Draco Malfoy, manipulator extraordinaire.

And then a few heads jerked up as they realised what he was singing.

Hermione inhaled a sharp, shocked breath.

Draco kept his eyes on her, and kept singing at her.

*'I am everything you want'*

Indrawn breaths across the Hall. Hermione almost smiled at his sheer nerve, and recalled him lying on her bed drawling, 'What else do I have to do?'

*'I am everything you need'*

Draco's mouth on her palm at the Quidditch game.

Draco in Arithmancy saying 'I'm trying to get your attention.'

*I am everything inside of you that you wish you could be*

*I say all the right things'*

Draco leaning towards her now, magnificently ignoring the rest of the Hall. Draco Malfoy, exactly what she shouldn't want, vain, untrustworthy, and spoiled to the end - trying to grab what he wanted.

*'At exactly the right time*

*But I mean nothing to you and I don't know why.*

*Why?'*

Hermione looked up into cool grey eyes, and tried to work out... something.

There was a moment of stillness, a moment in which that liquid voice was quiet. Draco simply stood in front of her, silver locks falling into his face, and waited for her to respond.

But Malfoys never waited long.

He blew her a kiss and left the hall, not waiting for the applause.

It rang out around her instead, a cacophony to which she tried to set her thoughts. She gripped the table, still shaken and incredulous. She was coming to understand one thing.

Malfoys did not give up.

\*

Draco sat by the fire in front of the Slytherin common rooms, staring into the fire.

This brooding hero thing was, since it was him, very picturesque - but it was getting ridiculous.

Life was generally getting ridiculous.

Friendly with the Gryffindors. Rejected by a woman.

And not just any woman. The woman. The one who mattered.

Actually, there being a woman that mattered was ridiculous too. It was totally against the Malfoy Code.

But... there it was.

Draco was trying not to think too much about it.

He was also trying not to think about how his father would react.

Of course, the 'Daily Prophet' had already interviewed Pansy Parkinson and Seamus Finnigan, and the Harry Potter/Ron Weasley/Draco Malfoy story had broken last week.

His mother had been forced to write to him, as Lucius Malfoy believed he was having a stroke. Draco's portrait had now been hung in the torture chambers beside Uncle Ethelfride's.

There was only so much more his father could do to him.

Draco tried to distract himself by thinking of something more soothing.

Like, who was trying to kill him?

It was a bit unsettling.

If coffee could be poisoned, this person was clearly mad. He must hold nothing sacred.

He was also clearly not a member of the sixth year Gryffindor dormitories, since it would have been easy to get hold of Draco then.

Just as clearly, he had to be a Gryffindor. And he had to be someone who was friendly enough with the sixth years to be sitting close enough to poison Draco's coffee...

But there was nobody in school who had the Potions skill to manipulate the Potion except for Blaise, Hermione and Draco himself.

I've got it, Draco thought. It must have been the Invisible Man. Mwhahaha.

He must have made other attempts to get Draco. Who had been trying to cause distractions around him lately...?

And what the hell had been the taste in Draco's mouth?

Muggle plastic. Who carried pieces of Muggle plastic in their hands?



There was something nudging insistently at the back of Draco's mind. He sat forward in his chair, face intent, the firelight exploding pale orange in his eyes and along his cheekbones.

Across the room, Pansy Parkinson sighed happily and rested her chin on her hands. Getting in some quality gazing time.

Come on, Draco thought. I just need one thing to slot into place, I just need something to...

To...

*Click.*

Who had charged up the Quidditch bleachers to tell Hermione that Harry and Ron were having a fight, and offered to hold Draco?

Who had been rumoured to be dating Blaise Zabini? Blaise, who was not only extremely talented at Potions but who was in Draco's Potions class?

Who had been near enough to poison the coffee, and who constantly had a plastic Muggle artefact in his nasty hands?

Draco got up, to Pansy's intense disappointment.

'I'll kill him,' he said.

\*

Harry and Ron were playing a game of chess when Draco came in, striding toward the dormitories, his eyes cold points of steel.

"Can't talk now. Must destroy."

The chessboard went flying.

~~~~~

Chapter Eleven

Revenge, Romance and Really Traumatic Events

Ron and Harry came to a skidding halt outside the room where Draco had Colin cornered.

"Draco!" Harry panted. "Think. Consider. Pause. Reflect."

Draco thought this was rich, coming from a Gryffindor.

Nevertheless, he took a deep calming breath.

Then four more.

"You're right, Harry," he conceded. "I will."

Harry and Ron breathed sighs of relief.

"*After* I kill him," Draco resumed.

"Nonono! You mustn't!" Ron seized his arm. "What makes you think that Colin did it anyway?"

At this point, Colin Creevey's reedy little voice piped up.

"Because I did!"

Harry blinked. "Oh. Well - that seems conclusive, yeah."

"I am about to conclude his *life*!" Draco shouted. "Push off, Weasley. Go take your morals where they're wanted, I happen to be allergic. Now, where was I? Oh yes - Prepare your last words, Creevey!"

"Eeep!"

Harry seized Draco's other arm.

"Now I'm sure Colin has an explanation," he said soothingly.

"For trying to kill me?!"

"We all have our off days."

"I don't have homicidal lunatic days!" Draco paused to mull this one over. "Or if I do, it's not the point in question."

"I am not a lunatic!"

Creevey claimed this, and yet he kept talking back to an evidently enraged Slytherin.

It just didn't seem convincing.

"I am merely choosing the side of the greatest strength," Colin proceeded. "The Dark side is clearly the most powerful."

"Would that be because he was beaten by a baby, or that children successfully foil him at every turn?" Harry mused. "Wait, sorry. You were saying?"

"All my life I've been fascinated by - power," Colin said. "I worshipped yours for a time, Harry Potter."

Draco rolled his eyes. "We know, your creepy crush was the talk of the school."

"But even Valentines failed to win your attention-"

"That was *you*?" Harry said. "Ew!"

"Can I kill him now?" Draco demanded.

"No!" said Ron.

"Maybe," said Harry.

Colin continued with his rant. Evil people were always just dying to tell people their nefarious plans.

Draco didn't get it. They were never getting a confession out of him unless they brought back the rack.

"So I moved on to bigger game..."

"Please not Dumbledore," Ron breathed. "Don't tell me you sent Valentines to *Dumbledore!*"

"No, the Dark Lord," Colin snapped. "Have you been not paying attention at all? This is my wicked plot here."

"Sorry. Right. It's just the girls are having aerobics right outside that window. There's a lot of lycra and - no. Go on. Really. I'm listening."

"Well, the Dark Lord was pleased to accept my offers of devotion," Colin said.

"And your Valentines?" Draco asked, lifting an eyebrow. "Roses are red, your eyes are too, Death we eat and-?"

"Could you people please stop interrupting?" Colin complained. "This is serious, you know!"

"Hm. Oh, yes. I agree with you completely," said Harry, who was looking out the window.

"I wished to gain access to the innermost Circle, and thus to be nearer my Lord. So I decided to barter for favours with the son of one of his most influential Death Eaters."

"Hang on, kidnapping someone's child means you get put into a position of trust and power?" Harry asked.

Draco shrugged. "Pretty standard, really."

"And people wonder why Evil Empires fall..."

"Since the son tends to be a little violent and unstable in his natural form, I decided to transform him into a more natural shape."

"Violent and unstable? Violent and - I'll give you violent and unstable, you little pipsqueak, I'll give you violent and unstable right up the-"

"Come on, Draco," Ron said. "You have to admit he has a point."

Draco subsided. "Well, yes. But I'm still insulted, dammit! I have feelings." He got blank, incredulous stares from all sides. "I could have feelings," he added peevishly. "If I *wanted* to, I could."

"It was difficult," Colin told them all loudly. "I had to use great cunning. I had to seduce Blaise Zabini."

Draco rolled his eyes again. "Boldly going where many men, women and household pets have gone before."

"I had to find out her Potions knowledge, and convince her to slip the Potion into your beaker. Little did she know that I had altered it, so the time limit on it was indefinite. She thought it was a mere joke!"

Colin went off into a peal of wicked, theatrical laughter.

Everyone stood and looked at him until he stopped.

"It was a very cunning plan," he said defensively. "Except then he bit me. And then Ron picked him up, and then all my devilish ploys to get him back, like setting Crabbe and Goyle on Ron and-"

"Maybe you can kill him after all," Ron mused.

"Er, well, they didn't work," Colin finished hastily. "I sneaked into the sixth year dormitory once, but he was sleeping with Hermione that night. So I merely paused to get a few photos of Harry slumbering, and left."

"Oh, this is *nasty*," wailed Harry.

"Why didn't you just go into the girls' dorms and nick me?" Draco inquired.

"Malfoy," Colin said reproachfully. "I realise that I am a minion of darkness, but sneaking into the girls' dorms at night is just plain wrong."

Harry and Ron nodded, looking shocked.

Draco was never going to understand Gryffindors.

"And then Ron performed the reversal of the charm, in the Sleeping Beauty style-"

"Please skip ahead," Ron said.

"Well, I knew I had to dispose of Malfoy before he found out that it was me. I could not risk discovery, so I decided to kill him. But that plot was foiled too."

Harry looked mildly puzzled. "If escaping discovery was so important, why have you just told us everything?"

Colin blinked.

"Oh yeah. Bugger."

"Okay," Draco said briskly. "Now that that's settled, and everyone is convinced of his guilt, I shall just painfully torture Creevey to an agonising death and it's all over, no hard feelings, no harm done."

"No, you can't!" Ron cried. "Harry, back me up here! It would be wrong."

"Yeah... wrong," Harry repeated, looking a bit wistful.

"I happen to know he took photos of you that Millicent Bulstrode bought and keeps in a special collection," Draco tempted him.

"No, no," Harry said, getting a grip on his heroic self. "We have to take him to Dumbledore."

"And he'll what, give him a detention?" Draco yelled. "No! I want to kill him! I want *revenge*! I'm a Malfoy, I want blood! Give me... blood... damn you, Gryffindors... blood... *blood*..."

"Is he always like this?" Colin asked apprehensively.

"Worse in the mornings, when he hasn't had coffee," Harry said. "But don't worry, little evil minion. We won't let him hurt you."

Draco struggled and tried to bite. It was quite an effort to restrain him.

As Seamus trailed home disconsolately from the infirmary, he was presented with the spectacle of a biting sweaty Draco being pinioned by two struggling boys, and Colin Creevey trailing after them like a whipped slave child.

He spent the rest of the day with his head under the blankets.

*

Dumbledore was quite startled when Ron and Harry came barrelling into his office, frogmarching Draco like a prisoner of war between them.

"What has Mr Malfoy done?" he inquired mildly.

"Nothing!" Draco howled in disgust.

Dumbledore looked at Harry inquiringly.

"He's telling the truth, sir," Harry said.

"Really? How... unexpected."

Draco yanked his arms out of the Gryffindor grip.

"It was Colin Creevey!" he declared passionately. "He tried to kill me! He tried to poison my coffee, he put fur on my beautiful beautiful face! I demand that he be expelled, I demand that he be punished, I demand that he be killed until he is sorry!"

Dumbledore put down his quill and looked past the irate blond.

"Where is Mr Creevey?"

Harry and Ron cast a frantic look behind them.

"Er," Harry said. "He was here just a minute ago..."

"To tell you the truth, sir," Ron put in, "we were a bit occupied with Draco..."

"You let him get away?" Draco howled. "You total, utter, complete wankers! You - you *bloody Gryffindors!*"

"Don't listen to him, sir," Harry said.

"Yeah," Ron agreed, "yeah, he's overwrought..."

"I am not overwrought! I am completely on top of wrought!" Draco snapped. "You two should have been drowned at birth! And you - you - why don't you get the Aurors, there's a murderer on the loose, you senile old... mphmphmph..."

Harry, with great presence of mind, had leaped on Draco's back and clapped a hand over his mouth.

"He's just feeling a bit delicate today," he explained hastily, as Draco foamed at the mouth and tried to strangle him. "When you get to know him, he's really quite - Ron, help me!"

Ron jumped into the fray. The boys wrestled down the viciously struggling Slytherin. Mumbled words about blood were escaping between Harry's fingers and at one point Draco almost heaved himself up and they fell in a jumble of limbs and virulent curses.

Dumbledore quietly cleaned his glasses.

"Draco!" Ron yelled. "Be calm and we can stop Colin escaping!"

Draco wasn't listening. He seemed to be trying to rip Ron's arm off instead.

"Draco!" Harry pleaded. "You're messing up your hair!"

Draco went still.

"...Really?" he asked in a small voice.

"No," Harry said, softening. "I just said it to hurt you."

"...My hair's okay?"

"Er - yeah. Will you be good now?"

"Ha! You wish."

"What Harry meant was, will you try not to rip off our limbs?"

"I can't promise anything..." Draco mumbled mutinously.

"For the next five minutes?"

"Ah - yeah, all right. Get off me, both of you."

Everybody stood up.

Draco crossed his arms and looked distinctly sulky.

"Now begone, incompetent buffoons," he commanded. "You have failed me and I am most seriously displeased."

"Sorry about him, sir," Harry said. "He forgets people aren't house elves."

"Don't talk back!" Draco snapped. "Letting Creevey go, you imbeciles, leave this room at once or it's your ears in the oven door! Go on, I mean it. Out of my sight!"

Dumbledore tactfully motioned them out.

When the door closed, Draco turned his gaze on his headmaster. He narrowed his eyes and pretended that he was a disobedient house elf with an unusual growth of beard.

"It's nice to see that you're getting on well with the Gryffindors," Dumbledore told him amicably.

"Oh yes, let's please talk about my social life rather than pursuing the criminal," Draco said sourly.

"I just like to see that you're making friends," Dumbledore said placidly.

"And probably getting disinherited in the process," Draco added morosely. On balance, he would rather have been tortured a bit. "Why all this concern for me? Trust me, you'd be better off keeping Harry as your golden boy. I'm not even a gold-plated boy."

Dumbledore smiled.

"Well, we're practically family. Or hadn't you heard? My brother Aberforth and your uncle Ethelfride have set up house together. I believe the wedding will be in the summer."

Few things could make Malfoys forget about murderous rage.

This was one of them.

"A-Aberforth Dumbledore?" Draco's voice was low. "The one who was in the papers because of that - *thing* with the goats?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed. I hear Ethelfride's bridal gown is quite beautiful."

Draco remained very still for a moment.

Then, in a slow, reproachful voice, he said: "I am going to go now. Try not to inflict any psychological damage on me as I leave."

Harry and Ron were extremely startled to see Draco burst from the headmaster's office screaming.

"What did he say?" Harry asked as the wild shouts echoed in the corridors.

"Er - 'God damn progressive education'?" Ron said doubtfully.

"Huh." Harry blinked. "He worries me sometimes."

"He might end up going the same way as that uncle of his."

"Oh, Ethelfride Malfoy?"

"You know about him?" Ron looked mildly surprised. "You never know about anything."

"*Everyone* knows about Ethelfride."

*

Harry and Ron caught up with Draco, who was still looking white and shaken.

"Let go!" he said. "I wish to be alone, dammit. Or if you won't go away, hand me a mirror, I wish to check my hair."

Harry and Ron seized his elbows.

"Not this again," Draco moaned. "I happen to be a student here, not a criminal."

None of the Malfoys were criminals.

Technically, you weren't a criminal until you were caught.

"No, no, you'll like this," Harry promised. "Look out the window at the lake... see? Colin's making a break for it!"

They all watched the mousy-haired little figure as he seized a boat and began to paddle across the lake.

They all saw the almost lazy swipe of the giant squid towards the boat, and Colin's terrified squeal as he was seized by a tentacle and waggled around.

Then Draco leaned out of the window, stretched delicately and indulged in a mildly evil laugh.

Repent, repent, all ye who mess with the Malfoys, for they are vicious pitiless little bastards.

"I think I'll go take a stroll by the lake," he said innocently. "You know. To enjoy the view."

*

"Please stop chuckling with fiendish glee, Draco."

"I'm sorry, Hermione, do you have a headache?"

"No, I just find it extremely disturbing..."

Draco, curled up by the fire in the Gryffindor common room, was examining photographs taken this afternoon by the lake. He had watched Colin Creevey's desperate swim for the shore quite a few times.

For some reason, he never got tired of it.

But he put them aside to look over as a sweet bedtime visual of fear and terror, and turned to Hermione.

"Tell me about the spell that made it possible for your TV to work," he requested with his most fascinating smile.

Hermione could never resist an appeal for knowledge, and she turned and began to talk quietly. Draco listened carefully.

Ginny, Harry and Dean Thomas exchanged satisfied smiles as her curly head bent over Draco's smooth blond locks, both of them engaged in an utterly incomprehensible conversation.

Awww, said their exchange of glances. Aren't the academic freaks cute?

Ron the Oblivious said loudly, "It's a good thing you rescued Colin's camera, Draco. I want pictures of me and Cho at the Yule Ball."

Ginny stifled a groan behind her hand.

"Hey, Draco," said Ron, "who are you taking to the b - Harry, why are you beating your head against a table?"

"Was I?" Harry asked. "Didn't notice."

Draco gave Ron his Glare o'Death TM (patented to the Malfoy family 1783).

"Oh, I don't know," he said lazily. "Not a Slytherin, that's for sure. They have many sterling qualities, but Pansy Parkinson couldn't take no for an answer back in fourth year. Despite the fact that I was practically dressed as a priest... a fairly drastic procedure for someone who's taken vows of non-poverty and non-chastity."

He cast an elaborately disinterested look around the room.

"Of course, if someone here is in need of an escort I would be delighted - drop dead, Patil, I didn't mean you. And come out from behind the sofa Finnigan, honestly, I have standards."

"I suggest you save yourself and your vows of non-chastity for some Hufflepuff who might appreciate them," Hermione said in a neutral voice

Draco pouted.

Parvati Patil had to go for a nice quiet lie-down.

"Wait, Hermione doesn't have a date either," Ron said brightly. "... Ginny, why are you gnawing your pencil?"

Ginny bit the pencil in half.

"Ah - nervous habit."

"Say, Harry," Ron said in conversational tones. "Could I borrow the Marauder's Map in case - ah, Cho and I want to go someplace private?"

"Of course," Harry said readily. "I won't be using it."

Ginny snatched it back.

"The hell you won't!"

A mumble of "Vixen" came from the direction of Draco Malfoy. Then he glanced over at the Map.

He looked vaguely apprehensive.

"You have a Map which, ah, shows everything going on in the school?"

"Yes, I've had it ever since third year..."

"Oh." Draco blushed very much. "Well. Well, on the, er, few nights you might have seen my dot in the Astronomy Tower with those three girls, I'll have you know it was a perfectly legitimate study group."

"Oh yeah?" Ron said. "What planet were you studying, Ur-"

"Shut up, Weasley!"

*

Harry was looking extremely guilty, Hermione thought. As if he had crept into the girls' dormitory on a mission to seduce the masses, when in actual fact he had been invited in.

He glanced over at Parvati's stocking on the floor as if it was a symbol of flagrant indecency.

"You wanted to talk to me, Harry?" Hermione prompted him.

"We did," Ginny agreed, taking over for Harry since he was busy eyeing the beds apprehensively, as if he suspected that dancing girls were hidden under them.

Harry snapped out of it.

"Draco's a nice guy," he said suddenly and warmly.

"Apart from his regular outbursts of homicidal rage, immoral mentality and the way he spent five and a half years sadistically tormenting us, you mean?"

Harry blinked.

"Well. Yes. There's that."

Ginny coughed. "Overlooking those small issues, Draco has many good points."

Harry nodded. "He's smart."

"He sings well."

"He plays chess well."

"He likes books."

"He's funny."

"He's got those jeans."

"Yeah, he's kind of pretty. Er, so I hear from Parvati."

Hermione stared.

"You people do realise that you're trying to set me up with someone from *Slytherin*. Slytherin, the house that drinks virgin blood."

"Oh, but Draco's different."

"Yes, he is their leader! He probably overdoses on the virgin blood! And if you think he's so great, you take him to the ball."

"I'm taking Harry."

"I'm taking Ginny."

"Harry, I *wasn't talking to you*."

"Oh."

"I don't want to arrive home this summer and tell Mum and Dad that my boyfriend will be along in a second, he's just torturing a helpless puppy he found by the road."

"I'm sure Draco wouldn't hurt a dumb animal," Ginny said at last, after a whispered conference on whether Neville Longbottom counted.

Hermione dropped her book with a thud.

"Have you all gone quite mad? Am I the only person who retains her senses on the subject of Draco 'I Am the Evil One! Bwha!' Malfoy? Just because he thinks he can strut in here with his hair and his jeans and his singing and his jokes and his jeans and - where was I?"

"His jeans," Ginny and Harry chorused.

"I was nowhere of the sort. I mean, I'm perfectly happy being single and untormented. So you people can all trot off to the Yule Ball, and pair off, and I shall be alone and yet fulfilled while you have Harry, and Ron has Cho, and Draco Malfoy has his-"

"Exciting assortment of love slaves?"

The entirely unexpected lazy drawl made a girlish scream echo around the room.

Afterwards, Harry looked quite embarrassed.

Hermione stared at Draco's face framed by her window.

"What are you doing?"

"Ah." Draco smiled winningly. "I've climbed a trellis to your window. It's very romantic and dashing of me, I feel. I'd have asked to climb your hair, but, well, it still has those bushy issues, and there'd be an unpleasant static factor..."

"Draco. I have no trellis."

Draco carefully turned his smile up the few notches from Winning to Irresistibly Adorable.

"You do now."

Hermione ran over to the window.

"You *grew* a *plant*?"

Over her head, Harry and Ginny were giving him a frantic thumbs-up.

"But that must have taken *hours*... you must have missed *classes*..."

"Oh, no," Draco said casually. "I just bullied Neville Longbottom into doing it."

As the window snapped shut on his fingers, he got the uncanny impression that he was still doing something wrong.

*

The next morning at breakfast, Draco gazed morosely into his coffee and mused over his current situation.

Evil had been defeated. Which, surprisingly, was a good thing, because he - for once - hadn't been the evil.

Score. Malfoy - one. Murphy (take that, you bastard!) - zero.

But now...

He was having problems with his *love life*. He was having trouble *getting a girl*.

It just seemed so - wrong.

And the Boy Who Lived But, You Know, Didn't Actually Have Any Sort of Life, was trying to set him up with his friend. Ha! Harry Potter, who wouldn't have known hot action if it had turned up naked in his dorm.

If only he had some sort of clue as to what was going wrong.

He frowned. He was still wealthy, right? Oh yes, he was so wealthy. Mmm-hmm. Just like that, secret Swiss branch of Gringotts account, yes please, enrich me harder.

He was still charming, witty and a sexy bitch. Blaise Zabini and Pansy were composing a poem to that effect further down the Slytherin table.

And he was still gorgeous. Wasn't he? Wasn't he?

Come to think of it, it had been fifteen minutes since he'd checked his hair.

He angled a spoon to his face.

No - still gorgeous. Oh, yes. Could his features *be* more classically defined? Not unless they were described by Homer.

So what could possibly be the problem?

Draco sighed. It was clearly time for drastic measures.

He fixed the Smouldering Gaze on Hermione. He had great hopes for this gaze. He had practised it on Pansy last night and she had screamed faintly, staggered and dived for his clothing.

It had taken several cries of 'Bad touches!' until someone had come to his rescue.

He focused the Smouldering Gaze. Once she looked up, he was planning to give her the I'm So Molestable smirk.

She didn't look up! She just kept reading the paper.

She was a creature of chilled steel.

Draco cuddled his coffee to his chest. Ahh, sweet faithful caffeinated lover. You will never leave me.

When his owl came winging its way over to him, nerves made him spill it on his shirt.

After all, Lucius had written the other day sternly instructing him not to invite Ron Weasley to the ball. He couldn't take much more.

Crabbe picked up the envelope beside Draco's plate.

"What's that?" he rumbled.

"Looks like... a wedding invitation," Goyle said. "Er. Draco. Why are you stabbing yourself with a butter knife?"

"Kill me," Draco said. "It's kinder this way."

Rejected by a woman. About to read the most traumatic document of his young life.

And oh God, Edmund that-rude-little-prat Baddock had just collided with Hermione. Again.

Plus, coffee on his shirt!

"Et tu, Brute!" he murmured wildly.

Draco - one. Murphy - 17, 842.

Draco wondered if he could steal some of Seamus' Prozac.

~~~~~

## Chapter Twelve

### The Yule Ball

*White lightning bound to drive you wild  
The way you moved it was a sin  
So sweet and true  
Always wanting more  
Leaving you longing for  
Black velvet and that little-boy smile  
Black velvet and that slow Southern style  
A new religion that'll bring you to your knees  
Black velvet, if you please.*

The wedding invitation lay by his plate.

The coffee remained on his shirt.

Alarm bells and manic giggling were going on inside his head.

And Edmund Baddock had just curled his lip and said, "Out of my way, Mudblood."

The only sensible action to take at this time was to slip off his chair and whimper quietly under the table.

Of course, Malfoys Didn't Whimper, but he thought he could get away with a small manly gurgle.

So it remained a total mystery to him why he was suddenly on his feet and pinning Edmund to the nearest wall.

Through a haze of fury, he heard Seamus mutter, "Oh God, paedophilia," and fall off his seat.

"Don't *ever* call her that again."

And he didn't understand, he just didn't understand what this feeling was.

"Don't you dare use it. Because it means that she's less than you are, and all you're doing is repeating Death Eater cant, and you never stop and think!"

And he'd said it himself. Over and over again.

"Don't talk to me about pure blood," he heard himself snarl, gesturing over at Crabbe and Goyle. "Look at them! Just look at them, and then look at her, and just think - think *very carefully* - before you ever say *mudblood* again!"



And then he'd stopped shouting. And the entire Great Hall was staring at him. And he'd just made a speech indicating moral indignation, and there was coffee on his shirt, and he'd clearly made a complete idiot of himself.

What would Hermione think?

Draco began to consider euthanasia as a viable option.

\*

"Well, that was fun," Draco said as he and Harry made their way down the corridor. "I can just see the ickle firsties' letters now. 'Dear Mummy, Today at dinner Draco Malfoy gave his weekly performance of a Total Prat Mooning Over A Girl Who Doesn't Like Him.'"

"She does like you," Harry consoled him. "She just doesn't want to go out with you."

"But why doesn't she want to go out with me?" Draco wailed. "I'm gorgeous and charming and practically perfect in every way!"

Harry blinked. "And your modesty astounds us all."

"Well," Draco said in a bashful manner.

"Maybe your chances with Hermione would be better if you didn't flirt with every other female you see," Harry suggested.

Draco looked extremely affronted. "I do no such thing! Why, hello, if it isn't the Attractively Voluptuous Lady."

Harry coughed as the Fat Lady giggled and opened the door for them.

"And, while I'm sure that you're a decent person deep down-"

"Potter!"

"*Really* deep down-"

"Keep trying."

"Fathoms deep."

"Your universal goodwill and faith in the world makes me positively nauseous."

"While I'm sure that you're - not Voldemort in disguise-"

"How do you know?" Draco demanded. "Bwah!"

Harry sighed. "Maybe she won't go out with you because you can't hold a normal conversation."

"I happen to think entirely in one-liners. I can't help it. I was born this way. I think it's a matter of karmic balance."

Harry looked puzzled.

"I'm already stunning and intelligent and charismatic," Draco explained. "Imagine if I was sweet and coherent as well. It'd be utter chaos. I'd be knee-deep in swooning women, I'd never get anything done."

"Remind me again why we're your friends..."

"My birthday's coming up," Draco said. "I figured I could use a few more presents."

Ron looked up as Draco and Harry came into the Gryffindor common room.

"You're going to have to give us some hints," he said. "Remember, for most of the time we've liked you we planned on getting you a little collar for your birthday."

There was a thump from across the room.

"Now you're just tormenting Seamus!" Lavender exclaimed.

\*

Upstairs in the girls' dormitory, Hermione had her head in Ginny's lap.

"I never thought... he'd do something like that," she said in a quiet, stunned voice.

"Yeah, it's a shame Colin didn't get a picture of it," Ginny replied. She frowned. "What with him being a minion of evil and stuck in juvie Azkaban."

"Oh God. Oh crap." Hermione put her face in her hands. "What should I do?"

"Well, you could give him a bit of a snog."

"Ginny. What he did was - serious."

"If you're that grateful, you could give him a quick shag."

"Ginny!" Hermione looked scandalised. "Vixen!"

Ginny looked proud.

"Failing that, you could be his date to the Yule Ball."

"I, well... He hasn't asked me."

Ginny sat there and looked down her nose at Hermione.

"He hasn't," Hermione said defensively. "And I, God, it's all so silly, and his father tried to *kill* you-"

Ginny waved a hand. "Stop living in the past."

"And he's amoral and annoying and I don't even like blonds!"

"Nonsense!" Ginny said briskly. "Everybody likes blonds!"

Hermione stared.

"Except for me," Ginny added quickly. "I love Harry."

Hermione sighed and decided to ignore this.

"Look - just because someone's attractive doesn't mean you can have a relationship with them if you're utterly incompatible. He's not an acceptable character - he's not safe. He's hardly even likeable."

Ginny let her hands fall into her lap.

"Tell me one thing, Hermione. Do you even care about him?"

Hermione bit her lip.

"Of course I do!" She turned away. "That's the problem."

\*

Hermione suspected dastardly betrayal on Ginny's part.

It was just that - suddenly the whole *world* seemed to know that she would go with Draco Malfoy to the ball if he asked her.

And the whole world was almost convincing her.

Of course, such conviction might be useless.

Hermione gazed fixedly down at her Arithmancy homework.

Draco still hadn't asked her.

Of course, he'd been absorbed in the news of the, er, upcoming wedding in his family.

So had the rest of the Malfoys. The word by owl was that Lucius Malfoy had taken up with the strange Muggle drug Prozac after the news had been broken to him.

Though this hadn't stopped him from sending a Howler to Draco commanding him not to take Ron *or* Harry to the dance.

That day Draco had drunk coffee straight from the pot.

So he was stressed, occupied. He was certainly going to ask her. He was mad about her.

Of course, she had rejected him rather frequently.

And how interesting could a bushy-haired bookworm be, really, to a platinum blond protogod in skin-tight jeans?

Still... he'd turned down all his offers. Surely he was going to...

Hermione turned up her nose.

*Not* that she cared. She didn't even want to go to the ball. She wanted to use the valuable quiet time studying. She definitely didn't want to go to the ball with Draco Malfoy.

She kept telling herself that. The day before the ball, she told herself that aloud, to the bemusement of everybody around her.

"You?" Seamus said. "Why would Malfoy go to the ball with *you*?"

Hermione gave him a Glare of Death and stormed off.

"After all," Seamus muttered in her wake, "you're a *girl*."

\*

The day before the ball, Draco got a package from home.

It contained black velvet robes, and a stern injunction from his father to wear them and instantly cease entertaining this strange Muggle-clothing obsession.

He also ordered him to cease entertaining the Gryffindor boys in his bedroom.

Draco wrinkled his nose at the lurid description in the letter. He had no doubt about where Lucius was getting his information, and he thought that Pansy was letting her imagination run away with her.

This kind of obsession with pretty gay love was frankly unhealthy.

And these robes... Draco looked at them and made a horrible face.

It was just not on. They weren't form-fitting at all. This wasn't any kind of *selfish* reason. Girls throughout Hogwarts were *counting* on him to provide entertainment.

It wouldn't be fair to them.

"Who's the letter for?" asked a sinister hooded figure standing across from him.

Draco looked over disinterestedly.

"Me."

"What, people usually address you as DIM? Well - fair enough."

Draco blushed. "Just because my middle name happens to be Ignatius! - who are you, anyway?"

He asked out of mild curiosity, that was all. Ominous cloaked figures were fairly run-of-the-mill in the Slytherin common room.

One of the reasons he'd pelted away from that figure drinking unicorn blood was that he'd suspected it was Pansy Parkinson.

"Blaise," said the strangely deep voice from under the hood.

"*Blaise?*" Draco squinted. "Oh. Oh, I see. It's full moon again? Bad luck. Have you told whoever's taking you to the ball?"

"I'm taking Lavender Brown and Seamus Finnigan," Blaise answered, pushing back his hood and giving an evil grin. "And, well - she knows. Seems quite happy about the arrangement. And he may be too doped up to notice."

"You might kill him," Draco suggested brightly.

"Wouldn't be the first man I've killed," Blaise smirked.

Or the first woman. Or the first household pet.

For the sake of house togetherness, Draco did not voice this thought.

Blaise sat beside him.

"I've told you how sorry I am about that teensy weensy deal with the Potion, haven't I? You know I would never deliberately do something to hurt you, you gorgeous sex moppet you."

"Er. That's fine. Apology accepted. Could you not sit quite so close to me?"

Blaise sighed. "Colin deceived me. He didn't even seem to mind about the full moon thing. I'm just looking for the right - few people in the world for me." He perked up. "So, about the ball. You can come with us if you'd like."

"That would kill Finnigan," Draco replied absently. "Anyway, I'm going with Hermione Granger."

Blaise pouted and removed his hand from Draco's knee.

"I didn't know that."

"Nor does she."

"You mean you haven't asked her? How do you know she'll go?"

Draco paused. "That's just it. I - don't."

The uncertainty was novel. That was something to be said for it.

Well, if there was a chance he was going dateless, he certainly wasn't going under-dressed.

Draco looked down at the velvet robes, and got a fiendishly brilliant idea.

He called for a house elf.

\*

On the night of the Yule Ball, Hermione firmly kissed everyone goodbye. Both couples had offered to let her come with them, but she had refused absolutely.

"Just as well," Ron had admitted, glancing over at Cho. "I think I might be getting lucky tonight."

Harry had looked appalled. "Come with us, Hermione. *We* certainly won't be up to anything depraved."

"That's what he thinks," Ginny had murmured.

She was *such* a vixen.

Hermione had smiled and sent everybody off. Though she had asked someone to take a picture of Seamus' face when he met his dates in the Hall.

She had absolutely no desire to go to this stupid ball.

She was in her nice, comfortable pyjamas and her nice, fluffy slippers and she had a nice steaming cup of coffee. And all she wanted to do was her homework.

And she was utterly indifferent to the fact everyone else was having fun.

And she *certainly* didn't care who Draco Malfoy was taking to the dance. Oh, no. She didn't care what or indeed who he was doing, and she never had, and she would be perfectly happy if only she could never see him again-

And Draco Malfoy was standing in the doorway.

He had turned up his smile all the way to Justifiable Rape and torches gleamed behind him, making his hair shine like an angel's halo and his eyes shine like the downfall of saints.

And he was wearing - what amounted to a black velvet body glove.

Velvet that was poured into the dip of his collarbone, clung all the way down his torso and followed the line of his hips like a fascinated lover. Velvet that made the locks of his hair, brushing against it, glow like white light. Velvet that made him look slim, stunning and sinfully delicious.

He smiled again, this time the slow evil smile of someone who is perfectly aware that those before him are trying not to take unlawful liberties with his person.

"Hello, Hermione."

\*

Five minutes ago, outside the common room, Draco Malfoy had been having a most uncharacteristic panic attack.

He had just remembered that the Gryffindor password had been changed to celebrate the ball... and he didn't have the new password.

"Bugger."

Even now, Murphy plagued him!

Here he was, standing here in new clothes, having spent about three hours with his hair, about to actually take an emotional risk. (Against a very specific rule in the Malfoy Code, Number 33: Don't care at all. Really. We mean it.)

And he was distraught, clueless and talking to himself.

"How am I going to get past the Fat Lady - oh, hang on a minute. This is the Fat Lady. Lady. This is a woman. And I am Draco Malfoy! Right then, problem solved."

Of course, talking to yourself sometimes lent clarity to a situation.

If you happened to be dead sexy.

Draco adjusted his already pristine robes, shook back his shining hair and smiled a smile his Veela grandmother had taught him, and which made mirrors fall off walls and offer him sexual favours.

Then he leaned against the wall and fixed the Fat Lady's portrait with a smouldering gaze.

"What's a girl like you doing hanging over an entrance like this?"

\*

"D - Draco!"

*Of course I stammered, Hermione told herself. I was startled. Anyone would be startled. It would have been the same if Filch had showed up in black velvet.*

Draco was extremely upset to see a look of pure revulsion briefly cross Hermione's face.

Then she pulled herself together and banished the disturbing image.

"What are you doing here?"

Draco shook back his hair. "Ah. I was hoping you would do me the honour of accompanying me to the Yule Ball."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "And why are you asking me this late?"

Draco looked mildly panicked. "I - er."

And the fury Hermione had been suppressing for days welled up, looked around and leaped for a jugular.

"Oh, you suddenly realised that you didn't have a date, and you decided to settle. Is that it? Somebody turned you down and you thought it would be a safe option to ask poor dateless Hermione. Well I'm on to you-"

"Excuse me!" Draco shouted her down. "No you're not. You're completely off to me, and you may well be clinically insane! My God, I bloody well sang for you, woman, what will it take for you to believe me, a full-on striptease in the Great Hall?"

The idea had its appeal. But Draco was still raging.

"You turned me down so many times I was bloody dizzy, you idiot Gryffindor, and the reason I came here at this time was because I thought I could persuade you if I came totally dateless and made it clear that the only one I wanted to go with was you, no matter how embarrassing it would be if you rejected me again!"

"...Oh."

"And how dare you insinuate that somebody else turned me down," Draco added huffily. "Me! Don't be absurd."

Hermione forced down a laugh. She was not letting him get around her just because he was funny.

Resorting to humour was very cheap, anyway.

"Why exactly do you want me to go with you, Draco?" she asked primly.

He didn't answer.



She looked at him sharply, and then followed his fascinated gaze down to her cup of coffee.

"Draco!"

He blinked. "Huh? Oh, right. Sorry, what was that?"

"Why. Do. You. Want. Me - oh, for heaven's sake, drink the bloody coffee if you want it that badly."

She had *never* seen anyone move that fast.

Draco might have said 'I love you' but it was muffled under the coffee and Hermione wasn't believing anything an addict said in the throes of addiction.

"I want to go with you because..." Draco paused. "You're cute?"

"Try. Harder."

"I - because - oh, look, *Hermione*! I'm a Malfoy. We don't express any sort of genuine emotion, much less affection, I'm not sure we consider marriages for love legal. Can't we just - let the fact I'm not saying anything show you that - I'm saying all those things that people say when they're-"

"Normal?"

Hermione tipped back her chair and stood up, noticing as she did so that the firelight was glinting off the plastic eyes of her bunny slippers.

"Tell me, Draco. Why should I make exceptions for you just because you're a Malfoy?"

She examined the empty cup on the desk when Draco's face neared hers.

She looked, startled, into his eyes. She stared into her own image, reflected in molten silver. He looked nervous, just a little breathless and damn sexy.

"Well. Malfoys do have certain compensating qualities."

She didn't slap him.

She was *going* to slap him, any minute now, as his mouth touched hers. She was going to hit him so hard he saw stars right after she got her hands untangled from his hair, after she'd pulled away from those warm, searching, *talented* lips, after she had stopped making that embarrassing sound as he pushed her against the table and...

Draco pulled away. Hermione felt aggrieved.

"What do you have to say now?"

"... muh..."

Hermione pulled herself together.

"Try harder," she ordered crisply. "With words, please."

Draco felt extremely put out. After virtuoso Malfoy displays of skill, no maiden for centuries had been able to put together a coherent sentence.

Aside from 'Ravish me now,' that was.

Sometimes he seriously wondered whether he was a disgrace to his name.

"It's just that... you... you're so intelligent, but you've got all those morals, and I don't understand it at all but for some reason I find it bizarrely appealing..."

Hermione softened. "You mean - I make you a better person?"

Draco grimaced. "Sort of. Please don't tell anyone."

Obviously there was a definite limit to the amount of morals any Malfoy could acquire.

"If you say yes," Draco said suddenly, "it will make it all worth it. The rat thing. The name of Malfoy being shamed. My father's impending coronary. Even the - wedding. Everything. This entire adventure will make sense - if only you say yes."

"And if I don't?"

Draco's lip curled. "Then I guess I'll be forced to try and cuddle Potter in the showers after all."

Hermione laughed.

And it would be a stupid and entirely uncharacteristic thing to do. But Draco, standing here looking absolutely beautiful and not entirely sure of himself, was not behaving in classic Slytherin manner either.

It occurred to her for the first time that he couldn't have been planning for this either.

She held out her hand.

"I'll go."

Draco smiled.

"Er. But I have to get changed first."

"Don't do anything on my account," Draco urged. "We can dance the night away with you in your nightclothes, if you like. But if you feel a scanty negligee would be more appropriate for the occasion-"

She smacked him with her textbook.

"Be good. I bet you're a horrible dancer."

"I am a charming dancer," Draco said indignantly.

"In non-rodent form?"

Draco looked very reproachful. Then a thought seemed to strike him.

"Er. Hermione. I think I might go outside the Gryffindor rooms and wait for you. It's just that I had to use a certain amount of persuasion to get in here and... I don't think the Fat Lady will be terribly happy to see me with another woman..."

Hermione was torn between being thunderstruck and being very amused.

"You mean you - *chatted up* a... portrait? How was that even possible? Do portraits have hormones?"

Draco lifted his chin.

"When it comes to the Malfoys, everybody has hormones."

She couldn't help laughing then.

"Draco Malfoy... you rat."